終末なにしてますか？忙しいですか？救ってもらってもいいですか？

#05

Do you have what THE END? Are you busy? Shall you save XXX?

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『終末なにしてますか？　忙しいですか？　救ってもらっていいですか？#05』
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欲望たちがうりたいって、
おとうさんたちは思ってたらしい。
欲望をとりもどしたいって、
（真）たちは思いてたらしい。
そう、かーまが教えてくれた。
わたしは、その思さいうのを、
あんまりよく知らない。
思いた先をまよなてうこと。
どうやらそこでは、痛みがちって、
かえってきたひとを迎えてくれるらしい。
「おかえり」と言ってくれるらしい。
そしてそれが、とてもうれしくて、
身たかなものであるらしい……のだ。
わたしは、欲望を知らない。
ほしなもしがしとう、ここにいれば、
いつかはわかるのかもなって思ってる。
リーリあがうりたかった場所。
くーとりがかえりたかった場所。
わたしがいま、その場所を治りしめして、
目分がいつかたえるべき場所を、探している。

カイヤ
紅湖伯（カーフーボー）
ネフレン
黒燭公（ヘイジュゴン）

終末なにしてますか？
忙しいですか？
救ってもらって
いいですか？

#05
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Chapter 1: Who Is That Bravery for?

The long journey took a heavy toll on their memories. Their homeland grew farther and farther away, and their recollections of it grew fainter and fainter. The eons passing by no longer held any meaningful sense of time to them.

They set out on their journey because of some war or disaster, the details of which they could only vaguely recall. Driven out of their homeland, they set sail through the myriad stars on a boat. They visited many worlds along the way, only to leave them soon after.

Eventually, they realized that they had lost sight of the way back home. Looking behind only revealed a vast sea of darkness, with no trace of their ship's wake. And the very moment that grave truth settled in, their desire to return home swelled up in their hearts for the first time. But that desire, having no path to realization, soon became no more than a wild fantasy.

All they could do was simply continue to reminisce, hope, and pray. They no longer had any memories of their hometown. To make up for it, they read and reread the ancient records carved into the walls of their ship and yearned for the visions inspired by those words.

Their lives did not know the end known as death. After an eternity of wandering, they finally gave up on finding their home. Instead, they built a miniature garden modeled after their homeland to sleep in for the next eternity.

And thus ended one story, but another began.

Those voyagers of the stars later became known as the Visitors.

Leila Asprey had prepared herself beforehand, but listening to her master's talk proved to be far more painful than she expected.

"So this is the true creation story of the world? This sounds like some kind of delusional fantasy a teenage boy would make up! Come on, don't you think you're a little old for this, master?"

"Is that the kind of attitude the current Regal Brave should have? In the first place, I never tell a lie."

"I know I know, it's just kinda hard to listen to that with a straight face."

With a faint smile, Leila took a big sip of mead.

The two were sitting in a cheap bar located in some sketchy corner of the 6th District of the Imperial Capital. Despite it being deep into the night, the bar's lamps blazed bright as ever, and the cigarettes and sizzling meat produced enough smoke to cloud Leila's vision. The place could not get any farther away from cleanliness and elegance, but the food itself more than satisfied her stomach. For his choice of eatery, Leila added one point to her master's reputation in her mind.

"So anyways, according to your story, the Visitors all buried their souls in this miniature garden world that they created? The word 'soul' seems rather fishy and occult-like to me, but I'll leave that

alone for now.

After that, only two Visitors were left alive. One of them is Elq Harksten, the one we're going to kill tomorrow. And the other–" Leila pointed her fork straight ahead, at her master sitting across the table. "– is our very own 'foreigner' Nils."

"Don't point at people with utensils. It's rude."

"Well, you're a god, not a person."

"Don't point at gods with utensils either. It's still rude."

Leila turned her fork around and stuffed the meat still stuck onto the prongs into her mouth. The overflowing juices and bitter burn marks on the surface combined to produce a truly otherworldly taste. Turning around, she yelled to the kitchen, "This is good, old man! One more plate!"

"Besides, I'm completely different from Harksten and the others. Our homelands and the journeys we embarked on were different. I just happened to drift here to the same world as them."

"As a normal human of this world, that doesn't seem like much of a difference."

"I'm not as god-like as Harksten and them. I'm not all knowing or all powerful. I do have foreign magic, but it comes with strict usage limits. Two more times and I'll have to part with this world. Now, it's true that I'm special. I'm super strong, super smart, and super handsome. But I can't be anymore than that."

I thought you never told a lie, Leila thought about saying, but decided to keep it to herself. Unfortunately, her master, Nils D Foreigner, really was quite strong and smart. She couldn't really comment on the last part, but, well, maybe some people saw him that way. After all, beauty takes many forms, and Leila wasn't one to judge.

"So I'm afraid I can't be of much help in you guys' upcoming battle. I'll let you Braves take the spotlight while I clean up some boring stuff backstage."

"… I see." Leila munched on some vegetables. "Is that boring stuff related to True World?"

"Yeah, something like that," Nils answered vaguely, then emptied the bottle of beer in front of him. "You know, at first, I created it as a secret society whose sole purpose was to protect humanity. I even spent two years carefully thinking of a good name."

"Huh?" *Two years? Two years for that!?*

"But then I leave it alone for just eighty years and look what a mess it's become."

"Huhhh?" *Just eighty years!? I guess that's immortals for you…*

"After doing this and that for too long, time's started to really run out. Humanity's destruction is approaching on the scale of seconds now. But as if the group wasn't already enough of a mess, there's been an internal split and we're being forced to work in secrecy. We can't do much in this state, but I contacted the leaders and gave them some orders directly. The clues that lead you to me were probably from that time." Nils paused and narrowed his eyes. "Leila. Do you believe me up to this point?"

"Well, I don't really want to believe it, but you're not lying, right?" A nod. "In that case, there are two possibilities. Either you're neck deep in your crazy delusions, or everything you said is true… personally, I'd really prefer the former, but…" Leila sighed. "If I do that, you'll probably cry, and that would be pretty annoying too."

"That way of talking… you and Willem really are alike."

"That's just because we're both like you, master. You're responsible for tainting our young, innocent minds."

"Hey, you're the one that wanted to be my disciple, I didn't invite you," Nils complained, but Leila didn't seem to be listening. "Well, putting that aside." After stuffing a chunk of something, whether it was meat or fat he couldn't tell, into his mouth, Nils stiffened his expression. "Leila. Don't go to tomorrow's battle."

"Don't talk with food in your mouth."

“Nn? Ah.” Nils paused to swallow. “Leila. Don’t go to tomorrow’s battle,” he repeated. “Elq Harksten is still young. She doesn’t have the knowledge to declare a purge of humanity by herself. One of the Poteau must be behind their offensive… I’m guessing Jade Nail.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve known him for about as long as humans have existed.”

Eeeh?

“I also haven’t seen him for about as long as humans have existed.”

Eeeeh?

“The destruction of the world is near,” Nils continued as he started on a new bottle of beer. Leila felt his drinking was a bit faster than usual, but apparently, having a body immune to all poisons, he couldn’t get drunk. “To stop it, we need the corpse of a Visitor. Or more accurately, its soul. After that we need the knowledge and skills to process the soul and stabilize the original curse. If we don’t get everything ready soon, humanity will devastate this world in the not too distant future.”

“Why?”

“It’ll take too long to explain. Just accept it for now. So anyways, the Poteau’s reasoning is quite simple. They don’t want anyone to harm their precious Elq’s soul, so they’re going to crush humanity first.”

“Wait a second,” Leila cut her master off. “This sounds like a lose-lose situation. If we live, the world gets destroyed. If we die, then of course humanity is done for.”

“Not necessarily. I have the knowledge and skills to work the curse. We’ve already finished secretly building facilities to process the soul underneath some city. All that’s left is one Visitor soul…”

“I refuse,” Leila said sharply.

“… I haven’t finished talking yet.”

“I can tell where this is heading. If I can kill Elq then everything works out. Either you’ve talked with the Church, or one of our comrades is with True World. Either way, you retrieve the soul and do whatever with that curse. I’m guessing that was the original plan.

But since you told me to run away, that means you’re now planning to get the soul from somewhere else. Probably because I happened to show up tonight and your emotions got in the way.” Leila snatched Nils’ beer bottle and drained it. “You’re going to use your own soul, aren’t you? Since that wasn’t the original plan, I’m guessing the chances of success aren’t very high.”

No response. “I won’t let that happen. As the Regal Brave, it’s my job to sacrifice myself for the world.”

“Leila…”

“I know. I won’t be able to defeat the Visitors without using Seniolis at its full strength. Killing them probably won’t be a problem, but the probability of me returning home safely is close to zero.” Leila smiled. She had confidence in her acting ability. “But most importantly, if I go all out, I can definitely win. My life and determination won’t go to waste.”

“There’s no reason for you to fight so hard,” Nils said with a bitter face. Leila fondly remembered hearing that once before, from a certain talentless fellow disciple on some battlefield years ago. “You carry the sorrow of losing your hometown, but you have no anger. You didn’t take on the fate of a Brave or the weight of a Kaliyon by your own desire.”

“That’s true.” Exactly like the previous time, Leila nodded in agreement, but her next words were different. “But there’s nothing I can do about it. If I run away, Willem will still insist on fighting, even if just by himself. And he really would go off alone, you know?”

Leila grabbed a fried potato and threw it in her mouth. While chewing, she began to state what she had realized some time ago.

“The Regal Braves are strong. No martial techniques nor spells can touch them. No monster can match them. So if they fight, they always win. Why is that?” Nils kept silent. “All the Regal Braves have a similar tragic background. They carry similar oaths, and similar wishes. Without those, one cannot become a Regal Brave. Only those with a storylike background can achieve storylike certain victory. I don’t know the reasoning behind any of this. I’m simply stating my impressions of the Regal Braves, but I’m pretty confident that I’m right–

Basically, Regal Braves are no more than copies of the life of a prototype hero who once existed.”

Nils still remained silent.

“We aren’t living our own lives. We’re just following someone whose life happened to be convenient for everyone else, with minor modifications. To defeat an enemy that only a ‘hero’ can defeat, all they need is someone who lived a life similar to a ‘hero’.

So we, as fellow ‘hero’ look alikes, wield greater power than anyone else, just like the ‘hero’ once did. Just like him, when we fight, we always win. And…”

Oh no. Leila felt danger approaching: her eyes were becoming warmer. She decided that she would no longer cry. She decided that she would always hide her true emotions, that she would always be that annoying girl who never opens up to anyone. She swore to herself, but… but… she couldn’t stop it.

“Just like the ‘hero’ used to… we’ll never be able to save the people we truly want to save… we’ll never be able to return home to the place we long for… isn’t that right, 18th Generation Regal Brave, Nils Didek Foreigner?”

Nils, the man sitting across the table from her, who lived a far more complicated and troublesome life than Leila, averted his eyes. “It’s not exactly a rule or anything.”

“You just said that earlier, you know?” Leila managed a vague smile. “Even though it’s not a clearly stated rule, you still can’t deny

that things usually turn out that way.”

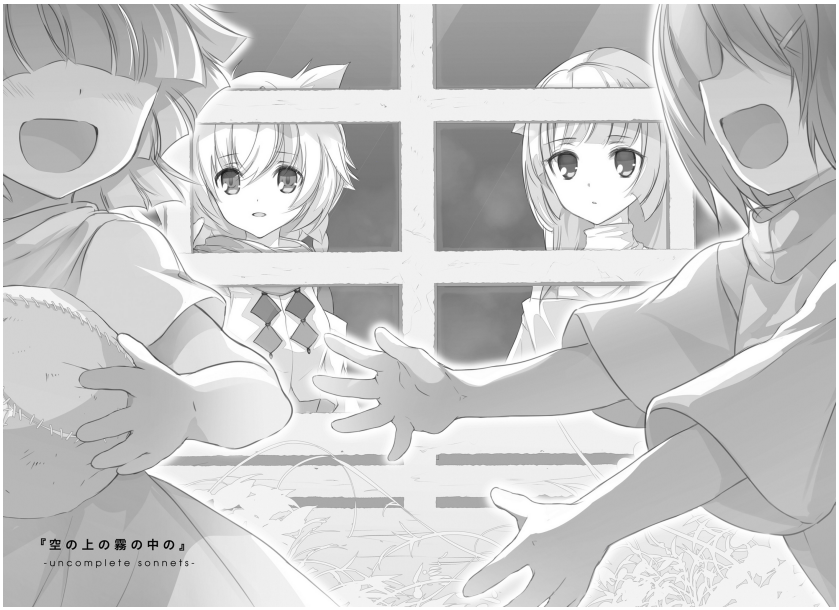
No response.

“Well, I’m glad. My determination wasn’t in vain. It’s true that I don’t feel any rage at having my home country and parents stolen from me, and I don’t think of my fate as one chosen by a Kaliyon to be that important, but, still, it’s not like I don’t have any reason to throw away my life fighting.”

It reached the point where she could no longer try to hide them, so Leila used her fingers to lightly wipe her tears away. Then, slightly amused at her own unfitting behavior, she let out a quiet laugh.

“Willem has a place he wants to return home to. He has people he wants to save. I’m different. And I think you are too, master.” With a quivering voice, Leila proudly declared, “I’ll never let Willem become a Regal Brave. That’s enough of a reason for me to fight. I carry on the title of Regal Brave for that purpose alone, and, tomorrow, I’ll defeat the Visitors for that purpose alone.”

Chapter 2: The Fog in the Sky



Part 1: Visitor Elq Harksten

She just wanted to be ‘someone’. That’s all she wished for at first.

A young child lay fast asleep inside a small, solid barrier. In simple terms, the barrier created its own little world isolated from the outside. The child had never taken even one step outside that barrier her entire life.

“You Visitors have such a large presence that, just by existing, you’d overwhelm the minds of all living beings in the outside world.” One of the child’s family members, Ebo, told her that once.

“Almost all of your parents and other elders had to break their souls into tiny fragments in order to live on this land. But we don’t want you to follow the same path. You’re our last master. We want you to stay like this forever.” Those were the words of another family member, Carma.

“We three Poteau exist to guide you Visitors — or, now that almost all of them have left this ship, we exist to guide you alone. We will risk our bodies and souls to protect you from anyone who would cause you harm, master Elq Harksten.” Those words came from yet another family member, Jay.

From the moment the child, Elq, gained consciousness, those three had always been by her side. They kindly supported her. They taught her much. They listened to her wishes, except, however, for just one thing. They never granted her permission to leave the barrier, to see the outside world with her own eyes.

One day, Jay disappeared.

Then, even Ebo stopped showing up.

When Elq asked Carma where they went, she never gave a proper answer.

“Once they complete their missions, they’ll come home,” she would say, then avert her eyes.

Mission? What could that be? Elq thought. However, her ignorance prevented her from pondering the question any further, and her youth prevented her from thinking about her ignorance.

Before long, Carma went off somewhere as well, leaving Elq all alone in the tiny barrier. She felt no anxiety nor bewilderment, only boredom. However, those days of boredom continued for far longer than she expected. Inside her sunless and moonless miniature world, she simply waited for her family's return.

Elq soon ran out of toys to play with in her barrier. All her stuffed animals developed wear and tear from her rough treatment, so she put them by the wall and left them alone in order to prevent further damage. Once Jay got back, he would surely fix them.

When the outer wall of the barrier broke, it made a loud rupturing noise. *What's that?* Elq thought. It certainly wasn't Ebo and the others. They wouldn't cause such a ruckus when entering. But who else could it have been?

The answer soon appeared in front of Elq's eyes. A red haired human, sixteen years old, wielding a strange, large sword which looked to be made by tying together many metal fragments. Named Leila Asprey, she was a type of weapon, called a Regal Brave, sent by the Church of Holy Light to kill the tremendously powerful Visitor Elq Harksten.

"… agh…"

Leila didn't have much longer. Wounds covered her body. Blood flowed down her armor. Countless tears infringed upon her clothes and her skin beneath. Any of them could easily have turned into fatal wounds with one wrong move.

"Who are you?" Elq sent a simple question in the form of a thought.

Her question contained no hostility, but, no matter how innocent her intentions, it carried an overwhelming amount of power. The thought released by Elq rapidly echoed throughout the closed off interior of the barrier and fiercely battered Leila's mind.

Leila writhed in agony, letting out the screams of a strangled bird. Ebo had not been exaggerating. When a giant whale simply twists its body, it causes little fish nearby to be swept away. Against Elq's immense soul, Leila's puny human soul amounted to no more than a speck of dust.

Leila's knees buckled, and she almost collapsed to the ground. However, using her sword, the Kaliyon Seniolis, as a walking staff, she managed to barely support herself. One small step at a time, as if dragging her feet along, she advanced forward.

Elq didn't know what to think. Still young, she did not yet understand the concept of death. The reality of the situation occurring before her eyes, Leila being on the verge of death due to none other than Elq herself, completely surpassed the limits of her comprehension. But precisely because she could not understand it, Elq grew interested. *What in the world is happening? What is she trying to do?*

"What are you doing here?" Elq sent out another thought.

This second impact sent Leila flying into the wall. Still, even as her blood dirtied the walls and floor, she stood back up.

Wow. I don't know what's going on, but this is amazing. Elq's interest only intensified upon seeing so many new things for the first time. And her excitement only made her waves of thought even stronger.

"I…" Leila started, but then paused to cough up the blood welling up from her throat. "I am Leila Asprey. I'm just a Brave who's going to kill you and save the world."

"That sounds like a lot of trouble."

Leila's entire body trembled as if struck by lightning. But still, she managed to say the words, "It is." As blood streamed down from the edges of her lips, she smiled fearlessly.

Elq did not understand the concepts of death, pain, or suffering. Looking at Leila, however, Elq could sense the amount of determination she held as she stood there. Ebo, Jay, and Carma, all

being too powerful, never showed Elq that kind of emotion.

“Why do you want to save the world?” Elq asked.

“… ah–”

Clinging onto her sword for support, Leila took a moment to think. *Well, I guess if I’m ever going to be honest, it might as well be now*, she mumbled silently to herself. “There’s someone I love.”

Leila’s expression at that moment. Her smile. Her gentle and dazzling smile. Seeing that, Elq suddenly wanted to be like her. A seed of aspiration took root inside Elq.

“I do realize it’s a stupid reason to go and kill a god, but what am I supposed to do? He’s even stupider. If I don’t act stupid first, he will. Willem really is stupid, after all.”

The effects of the impacts all overlapped with each other, working to shatter Leila’s consciousness. Her eyes seemed to be losing focus, as if entering a dream, but she continued walking closer, one step at a time. Eventually, she arrived right in front of Elq’s face.

“Well then, little god. I don’t have anything against you, but good night. Hope you have sweet dreams.”

Leila raised her sword, then, slowly, and cleanly, thrust it straight into Elq’s chest. The blade pierced Elq’s small body gently, as if patting a baby’s head.

Elq blinked in confusion. The Visitors, being immortal, could not meet death unless in their homeland, and the road there had been lost long ago. So even though they could sense pain, their bodies couldn’t recognize it as dangerous. Blood flowed out of the wound.

The cracks running through the blade widened slightly, and faint light began to pour out of the gaps, signifying the activation of the Talent held by Seniolis, the highest ranking Kaliyon ever forged by humanity. Its ability to convert any being into a mortal admitted no exceptions.

After a brief time, the faint light weakened, then disappeared

completely.

Leila, her heart and mind thoroughly decimated, at long last ran out of strength and closed her eyes.

Huh?

Elq's vision suddenly turned black, as if a curtain had descended before her eyes. A floating sensation enveloped her body. She seemed to be falling forever and ever. Down, down into a vast blackness. Deeper, and deeper she went. With that, the young Visitor fell into the long sleep known as death.

The Braves succeeded in defeating the evil Visitors, eliminating the great threat hanging over the world. Just like in all the tales of heroes, justice had prevailed, and the strong had protected the weak.

Unfortunately, lives were lost, but certainly not in vain. Their sacrifices enabled humanity to survive. Every single death had meaning. The only thing left to do was celebrate this wonderful happy ending…

But while the masses all rejoiced innocently, one night, Quasi Brave Navrutri Teigozak stole the corpse of Visitor Elq Harksten from its sealed storage vault and carried it off in secret. The fragments of the Visitors' souls not only served as one of the ingredients which created humanity, but also the key to saving humanity from destruction. Aiming to unlock the door to salvation, True World extracted the soul from the corpse which Navrutri brought and tried to smash it into pieces.

However, it didn't go too well. There were many reasons for this. At the time of the decisive battle, no one knew the whereabouts of True World's founder, Nils D Foreigner. An association of doctors stole a number of True World's researchers, realizing that their work could lead to breakthroughs in the treatment of many diseases. Furthermore, groups of adventurers attacked the organization, fueled by their sense of justice and their conviction that True World was an evil group which posed a threat to the

empire.

All the various reasons interfered with each other in complex ways to produce the inevitable outcome. The soul, which needed to be smashed into pieces as fine as grains of sand, kept almost half of its original form, while the other half broke down into pieces only the size of pebbles. Of course, that proved insufficient to be the key to salvation.

The tales of heroism no longer had any use. No one prayed for a miracle or attempted to reverse the situation. The ancient wisdom capable of solving everything never awoke. So naturally, humanity stayed on its original course to devastation.

Three things were left behind in the aftermath.

The terrifying Beasts which carried a deep hatred for all life and continued their violent rampages until no prey remained in sight.

The few refugees who barely survived the first year before seeking safety in the sky.

And lastly, the shattered fragments of Elq Harksten's soul, lying abandoned with nowhere to go.

"I had another dream about the land up in the sky."

Inside an illusory space created by the Shiantor, a red haired girl spoke to the empty air in front of her with a yawn.

"That fairy again? The one that dragged a beast child into a lake?" Out of that empty air, a large flying fish appeared.

"No, that one got punished right after that. This dream was about different ones. A bunch of fairies gathered inside a forest and caused a ruckus. They couldn't speak, but they cried and laughed and yelled."

"Sounds like a neighborhood disturbance."

"Yeah, others were annoyed," the red haired girl said, and the fish

nodded in approval. "… I wonder who they were."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"When I dream, I'm in a nostalgic place. Inside that small barrier, at a time when Ebo and Jay were still there."

"Ah, our ship, huh."

"There, it's like there are stories scattered about. In holes in the walls, or stuck between cabinets, in the illustrations of picture books… when I find them, I learn about those children. What they do, what they think about, what they feel… just like reading a book, I can read their lives."

"This barrier we're in is already like a dream, but you're still having dreams on top of that? I guess you're getting to that age…" the fish commented, but the girl didn't really understand. "Those children are all you, Elq."

"Me?"

"Those idiots that smashed your soul didn't have very much power or skill. Basically, they didn't finish the job. The fragments were all different sizes, and they still remained connected with each other. Those fairies in your dreams are the outcomes of parts of your soul… like hair that you cut off a long time ago or something. Since you didn't die properly, those fragments of your soul couldn't just sit still. And through that connection, you're seeing their lives as dreams."

"So my dreams are really happening, outside of this barrier world?"

"That's right."

"Those girls playing pranks and getting punished and causing a ruckus… all that really happened?"

"Mhm."

Ah, I see, Elq thought. *That's interesting.* The barrier world created by the First Beast which she resided in provided the naive Elq more

than enough entertainment, but the ephemeral lives of those fairies in the sky provided a completely different kind of stimulation. She enjoyed her dreams, or rather the lives of the fragments of her own soul, as a sort of amusement which allowed her to experience short and pleasant stories.

After that, time passed.

Inside the world created by the Shiantor, however, the passage of time held no meaning. Each day passed by in exactly the same way as the previous one. The common sense that with every cycle of the sun's rising and setting tomorrow becomes today and today becomes yesterday didn't apply. A constant today simply continued forever and ever.

Amidst that never ending monotony, Elq's dreams alone changed bit by bit. Floating islands fell at the hands of the drifting Teimerre. Some fairies prevented those attacks by making their Venom run berserk. Some people noticed that and got the idea to use the fairies, who had previously been nothing more than neighborhood disturbances living inside forests, as weapons to protect the islands.

"Recently, my dreams have been a little upsetting."

Seeing the fairies devote themselves to chasing their ambitions made Elq's dreams fun, but recently she hardly got to see that anymore. Now, she only saw fairies who killed themselves in order to save the lives of others, as if mere tools.

More time passed.

As always, when night came, Elq viewed the fairies' lives. She watched as the fairies learned the language of the island people, received swords, and became like soldiers while still being treated as weapons.

At that point, some of the fairies began to hold a sense of self and the desire to live. For some reason, Elq couldn't see those fairies for some time after their birth. Only after they grew up did their stories connect to her dreams. According to Carma, those fragments, after passing through many reincarnations, had moved closer to existing

independently, weakening their connection with Elq in the process. That meant Elq's amusing stories would eventually disappear altogether. She wasn't too happy upon hearing the news.

Then, one day, a particular fairy appeared in Elq's dreams. That fairy had hair the color of a clear blue sky and eyes the color of a calm ocean surface. She held great strength, and furthermore her usage of that strength was already firmly decided. She would wield the Kaliyon Seniolis and defeat an especially large Teimerre, losing her own life in the process. She existed for that sole purpose.

Ahh, not this again. Just by seeing the beginning of that simple and closed ended story, Elq fell into a bit of a depressing mood. That fairy would turn out exactly the same as all the others. She would throw away her short life without ever knowing fun or happiness. Elq easily predicted the conclusion.

Her prediction would have been exactly right, if not for three turning points. First, the fairy suddenly got the desire to walk around in a foreign city. Second, a mischievous cat snatched her precious brooch and ran off. And third, after falling from a high building, she landed on top of and almost crushed a black haired young man.

Are you hurt!? Are you alive!? Are any organs crushed!? A–

The two ran all around town, then parted, then met again.

Well then, nice to meet you, Mr. Supervisor.

Eventually, the fairy noticed the feelings inside of her.

… if I asked for a kiss or something. What would you do?

Her determination to die undone, she fell into a confusing whirlpool of resentment, but still, she held her head high and decided to chase after her aspirations.

Elq became engrossed in the story of that fairy, that life which had once been a part of her. She felt like that fairy had taken something important of hers, but she didn't know what.

The fairy loved someone and gave up on her own happiness for that person. She went without hesitation to a battlefield where certain death awaited her. *Ah, that's right*. Elq realized: the girl reminded her of Leila, the human Regal Brave who once killed Elq Harksten. Elq had died while wishing to become like Leila. She took that admiration with her to the grave.

That wish came true. All the fairies in Elq's dreams threw their lives away without a single thought about their own happiness. She just never paid much attention to those elements, since she herself didn't understand the concepts of love or one's own happiness very well. Her dreams had gotten boring recently, but now Elq realized that resulted from her own wish. She wanted to interact with the outside world. She wanted to wave a big sword around and sacrifice herself just like Leila. The whole time, those childish desires of hers had been fulfilled over and over again, consuming countless lives in the process.

But now, this blue haired girl… Kutori Nota Seniolis broke the pattern. Instead of simply following Elq's wishes, she had her own aspirations. She loved someone, and didn't hide those feelings. She wanted to bring that person happiness and find her own as well. She headed off to a perilous battle despite the fear and turmoil inside her.

Inside her dreams, Elq was no more than a young child sitting inside the ruins of the Visitors' old ship. She didn't understand what she had done, nor did she feel anything. However, when she woke up in the barrier world, she grew angry at herself. How could she have been so evil? She wanted to puke. The Church of Holy Light was right. Elq Harksten was a wicked god who deserved to be slain.

"You shouldn't worry about it," Carma said casually. "All those girls dying and being born are you, so you aren't actually harming anyone. Not only that, but those islands in the sky are being protected with your power, right? You're doing a good thing."

No, Elq thought. *Kutori might be me, but I'm not Kutori*. Even though the fairies were all parts of Elq, they each held their old individual personality and aspirations. Elq wasn't fighting desperately for anything like them. She couldn't. She could only watch from a

distance and admire those who could.

Time passed.

Elq watched as Kutori broke down from within during battle. At first, her dreams were no more than a form of amusement where she could experience short, pleasant stories. They were no more than a way to get stimulation she couldn't otherwise get inside the barrier world. So why? Why was this happening?

"I have one wish. This is probably going to be my last one," Kutori said.

I know, Elq thought.

"I can't remember precisely, but I feel like there's someone I want to save. There are feelings I want to convey."

I know that too. I'm not you, but you are me. I've watched you chase after Willem this whole time.

"I understand everything now. But still I'm asking you."

I figured you'd say that.

Elq couldn't bring herself to tell Kutori that she wanted her to stop, to live a little longer, to let Elq see a little more of her story. So she simply saw her off one last time.

Elq didn't shed a single tear in her dream. But still, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the story of the blue haired girl and the black haired young man until the very end.

Part 2: What Was Once Nephren

Poke poke poke.

She felt something small and soft repeatedly poking her cheeks. Extremely tired for no apparent reason, she would have greatly appreciated a little more sleep.

“Hey, wake up.”

Poke poke poke poke.

As she ignored it, the poking only accelerated. Her squishy cheeks bounced up and down. It didn’t hurt, but it sure was annoying. She rolled over, trying to drive the nuisance away.

A small splash sounded nearby.

“Come on, will you just wake up already?”

Shut up and go away! I already told… or maybe she hadn’t said anything yet, but anyways, she was tired. She wanted to sleep more, much more.

“If you keep sleeping here, you’ll catch a cold, you know?”

Now that this nuisance mentioned it, she noticed for the first time the coldness surrounding her. It felt like her entire body was drenched in ice water. Not a very good feeling. She wanted a soft blanket and a warm pillow.

With thoughts of comfortable bedding running through her head, Nephren slowly opened her–

Destroy destroy destroy destroy destroy destroy reclaim–

“– Ah!?”

Overwhelmed by the sudden destructive impulses threatening to snatch her consciousness away, she closed her eyes again in a panic. The tempest of impulses gradually subsided. *What was that?*

Rational fear took hold of Nephren in place of the irrational torrent of emotions. Some unknown thing had gotten inside of her. Or no, more like she herself had changed into something unknown.

“Oh my, look what’s happened to you,” an unfamiliar voice said. It sounded like it belonged to a middle aged woman.

“… who are you?”

“We’ll talk about that later. First of all, try opening just your right eye.”

“But…”

“It’s okay. Trust me.”

Nephren knew not to trust strangers, but she didn’t detect any hostility in the voice, and she certainly couldn’t keep shivering with her eyes shut forever. Preparing herself for the worst, she cautiously did as the voice told her to. Bit by bit, her field of view widened. Right in front of her, a scarlet fish floated about.

“…… um…”

“… are you okay? Can you see?”

“My eyes are broken. It looks like a fish is flying around.”

“Oh, then your eyes must be normal. Look, you can see my pretty scales, right?”

The fish performed a somersault in midair. Its red and silver scales sparkled brightly. As promised, they made for a fantastical and gorgeous sight.

As for those strange impulses from before, they hadn’t completely disappeared, but they seemed to be much more quieter. The constant urges gnawing at the back of her mind were annoying, but not a big problem.

Where am I? Nephren took a look around. Dirt walls surrounded her from all directions, towering into the sky like cliffs. A shallow pool

of clear water had gathered by her feet, submerging about half of her body. Far above, a large tear ran through the ceiling, exposing the blue sky beyond.

“Did we fall from up there?” Nephren asked.
“That’s what it looks like,” the fish responded.

“It’s cold,” she said with a shiver.

“I told you you’d catch a cold sleeping like that… well, you probably won’t have to worry about that for the rest of your life.” The strange fish said some strange things.

“What do you mean?”

“Well… let’s talk about that later. First lets look for a way out. Staying in here forever wouldn’t be very fun, and I’m starting to miss the sun. This area was originally full of holes, and the ground must have been weak. That’s how this big hole came to be. If we try all these paths, I’m sure we’ll get out eventually.”

“Nn…”

With her left eye kept tightly shut, Nephren ignited Venom. Glowing ashen wings sprouted on her back. The Venom did its job without any problems, or maybe even smoother than normal. Nephren’s body floated up off the ground.

“… hey, why didn’t you say you could fly earlier?”

“I’ll go ahead.”

With a flap of her illusory wings, Nephren took off for the surface.

Why am I still alive? Nephren wondered. In that battle upon the Plantaginesta, she received fatal wounds and fell to the ground. Then, in the few seconds before their death, she and Willem got trapped in some weird barrier world. When they eventually destroyed that world, she jumped into this weird black thing swallowing up Willem, and about half of it went into her.

No matter how she thought about it, any normal fairy would have died about three or four times during all that. And Nephren Ruq Insania, not having any special abilities like someone such as Kutori, was a very normal fairy.

Looking down at her body, Nephren saw that her army uniform had become tattered and hardly resembled its original form, but she didn't see any wounds. Given the short amount of time that had passed and the severity of the injuries she incurred during the battle, a natural recovery would have been impossible. It almost seemed more probable that somehow her consciousness had moved into a brand new body. However, both explanations seemed utterly ridiculous.

Standing on the surface of the ground, Nephren noticed the lack of wind. Looking up, the same blue sky that she saw in Regul Aire greeted her. However, unlike in Regul Aire, an ashen plain stretched out in all directions as far as the eye could see.

"… there really is nothing here…" the fish floating beside her said.

Ignoring her companion, Nephren searched for the figure of a certain someone, but came up empty. "Willem's not here."

They had been together the whole time. When they entered the illusion, and when they destroyed it, Nephren had always been inside Willem's arms. Even if some kind of impact had pushed Nephren away, it couldn't have put that much distance between them.

"I don't see my companion anywhere either. Her body's not in a condition to move around at all yet… I wonder where she disappeared off to."

Turning to her side, Nephren examined the strange fish once more. Big. That was the first word which popped into her mind. Although not large enough to swallow Nephren whole, the fish could certainly strangle Nephren to death if it wrapped around her. Needless to say, fish usually live in the water. She had read about flying fish in books before, but they were all small fish which swam through the air in groups. She had never heard of a flying fish this

big before, much less a fish that talks.

“… so who are you?”

“Hmm… I guess it’s about time to introduce myself. My name is Carmine Lake. As you can see, I’m the Poteau who rules over the winds and the rain.”

“… huh?”

Poteau. Nephren had read about them in a book before. They were gods who served the Visitors and the ones responsible for directly creating the world. In other words, very powerful beings. However, it didn’t really sink in immediately. I mean, if someone suddenly told you they were a god, you would probably be at least a little hesitant to believe them. Moreover, ‘as you can see’? All Nephren could see was a suspicious talking flying fish. Certainly, the fish was not normal, but she couldn’t exactly feel some sort of divine air about it either.

“I see…”

“Yup.” The fish danced around cheerfully. “Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea or anything. I wasn’t always like this. I used to have a super pretty, graceful, and magnificent physical form.” Ignoring Nephren’s utterly disinterested face, the fish continued, “I lost that about five hundred year ago though. Ever since, I can’t maintain my presence without residing in someone’s consciousness. I’ve been reduced to this pitiful illusory form.”

Illusory form. Nephren had never heard the term before, but she could infer what it meant. “So in other words… this body of yours isn’t real?”

“That’s right. Only you can see me, and only you can hear my voice. Well? Don’t you feel lucky to have such exclusive privileges?”

“… not at all.” In the first place, since no one else seemed to be around, that exclusivity didn’t exactly have any meaning. “So why is a god hanging around me?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what we need to talk about!” The fish raised her

voice and flapped her tail fins about. *Annoying.* “I had a proper host before you. I was with her the whole time inside that barrier world.”

Barrier world. That eternal miniature garden which Almaria, the Shinator, created by trapping every resident of Gomag within it.

“But then you guys came along and smashed that barrier world. The impact at that moment blew me out of my host’s consciousness. On top of that, I lost sight of her…”

“Eh…?”

“For a second I panicked, thinking I would just disappear, but then I found you nearby. And so that’s how I ended up with you.”

Wait wait… That world was a prison, and a special prison at that, trapping huge numbers of Emnetwyte. Taking that into consideration, this self proclaimed Poteau also being trapped there didn’t particularly surprise Nephren. However…

“How long were you in there?” Nephren asked.

“A looong time.”

“If you had already lost your physical body, when your consciousness got thrown out of the barrier, you shouldn’t have been able to live.”

“Mhm, that’s why I was in a pinch before I found you.”

“No, not that. You said you had a host. Are they okay?”

“Oh my, worrying about someone you’ve never met? How nice of you. Or could it be that you’ve realized my host isn’t a complete stranger to you?”

I think this fish is missing the poi– wait, what? The fish’s surprising words caused Nephren to accidently open her left eye ever so slightly.

Destroy destroy destroy destroy destroy–

“Agh…”

She closed it right away. Just from that split second, however, intense pain remained in her head, as if someone had whacked her with a giant hammer. She crouched down on the sand and endured the agony.

“Be careful, okay? One wrong move and it could hijack you,” the fish warned.

“… what do you mean?”

“The soul of the Shiantor is probably inside you, similar to how I’m inside you. Well, Beasts don’t really have a sense of self, so it’s more like a bundle of desires and impulses.”

Desire. Impulse. Nephren certainly felt those raging within her. “Will I become a Beast like those Emnetwyte?”

“Ah… no, probably not. Even though it’s not a physical form, strictly speaking, your body is still fundamentally yours.”

“Fundamentally?”

“It’s become infinitely close to being human-like after so many reincarnations, but hasn’t become completely human. So even if your mind gets disturbed, I don’t think your body will get taken away. Probably.”

… I don’t get it.

After a bit of walking, they stumbled upon the traces of a campsite. A ring of stone surrounded a pile of burnt out firewood. To the side lay numerous wooden boxes and tin cans half buried in the sand.

“What a rude bunch of tourists. This land isn’t a trash can,” Carmine Lake commented casually. Nephren had begun to realize that she didn’t need to keep up with all this fish’s small talk.

These ruins most likely marked the campsite of some salvagers. Perhaps they dug up more treasure than expected on their

expedition and ended up having to abandon unnecessary cargo from the airship. Nephren picked up a nearby tin can. It was just small enough for her to be able to carry it in one arm. Its contents had already been emptied out. On the side, sand had mostly rubbed out the writing, but Nephren still managed to make out the letters.

'Standard Type L7 Army Provisions – M'

"Army provisions…"

For a moment, the possibility that the ruins belonged to the Plantaginesta crossed Nephren's mind. However, she soon disregarded it. After the airship departed, the Shiantor appeared. In the presence of such power, the power to turn anything and everything into sand, mere tin cans wouldn't have survived. The campsite had to be from sometime after Willem killed the Shiantor and broke the barrier world.

"How long was I asleep underground?" Nephren asked.

"About ten days," the fish replied casually.

"… I'm not hungry though."

"Well, the presence of an everlasting Beast is inside you. Your body just hasn't been taken over yet." Another casual response. "Hmm… right now, you've transformed into a Beast just a little bit. Unaging and undying… thinking about it that way, it should be easier to understand, right?"

Certainly, that made it much easier for Nephren to understand why she wasn't ravenously starving. However, she didn't exactly want to understand that.

"So I'm… immortal?"

"In a way. You're not indestructible, so there are a few ways for that to happen."

"I see." *How ironic*, Nephren thought. She had prepared herself for death. She had accepted it, and moreover she had been just one step away from it multiple times. But now, things had somehow

turned out exactly opposite to what she had prepared for.

"… I guess I have no place to return home to anymore." Nephren mumbled.

Just a little bit or not, a Beast is still a Beast. She wouldn't be very welcomed in Regul Aire. Those days in the fairy warehouse, that leisurely carefree life, now seemed immeasurably far away.

"Are you okay?" the fish asked.

"Nn." Nephren gave a grunt which neither confirmed nor denied her well being. After all, she didn't really know the answer herself. She pulled a piece of red fabric out from one of the wooden boxes buried in the sand and wrapped it around herself in place of her tattered army uniform.

They walked across the sand for days. Under the influence of the Beast inside her, Nephren's body no longer felt exhaustion. She could have walked forever if she wanted to. However, she never felt like it. Every few hours or so, they stopped and rested on some nearby rocks. When night came, she laid down on the sand and closed her eyes. Fortunately, her body hadn't forgotten how to sleep. She no longer got tired, but still, she could sleep. She could dream. Her memories would one day all disappear into ashen sand, but for the time being, she could still warm her heart with recollections of the past.

Once, they came across a group of Beasts. On top of a gentle sandy slope, around ten Aurora were bathing in the sun, with their string like bodies resting vertically and their many needles retracted within. When Nephren approached, they showed no response. Even if she poked them, they twisted their bodies away in annoyance, but still didn't attack.

Do they think I'm one of them?

The nearly immortal Beasts don't require food. Accordingly, they don't prey on each other. They stop at nothing to destroy all other forms of life, but in a place with only Beasts, they behave incredibly

calmly, contradictory to their usual reputation.

Or perhaps that is how the Beasts were originally meant to be. Perhaps their strong desire for this peaceful state is precisely what drives them to eliminate the foreign beings who disrupt their tranquil repose. Perhaps that really is all they're trying to do, and when no foreigners are around, they simply pass their time with leisurely relaxation.

Nephren grabbed a relatively small Aurora and tried giving it a hug. It squirmed in resistance, but didn't poke her with its needles.

"Well this isn't good," Carmine Lake mumbled. Her personality didn't mesh very well with Nephren's, but on these empty sandy plains, the fish turned out to be a precious conversation partner. "Elq's presence is very far. Not only that, she seems to be up in the sky."

"… your previous host that you mentioned earlier?"

"Yes yes."

"By the sky, you mean Regul Aire?"

"That may be the case…" The fish shuddered as it pranced around. "Nephren, can you fly there?"

"… I might be able to."

Normally, that would have been a ridiculous proposition. Given the distance and altitude, it just wouldn't be possible for the wings of a regular fairy. However, Nephren was now no regular fairy. Now that her body no longer knew exhaustion, she could fly continuously without sleep for as long as she wanted.

However, she hesitated to do so. Of course, Nephren knew what would happen if she, an almost Beast, drew close to Regul Aire. She and the other Leprechauns existed for the sole purpose of protecting Regul Aire from the threat of the Beasts. She pictured Aiseia and Lantolq with their illusory wings spread wide, aiming the tips of their Dug Weapons straight at Nephren.

"… I don't want to."

"Come on, please?"

"No. If you want to go, go by yourself."

"If I could I would already be there! But I can't! I only exist inside your head!" Carmine Lake danced about in exasperation. "Ugh, we finally break out of that stupid barrier, and now look at what a mess this has become! I bet Ebon Candle and Jade Nail are off somewhere playing around and having a merry old time… come pick me up you idiots!"

I wonder where Willem is, Nephren thought, ignoring the self proclaimed Poteau's loud complaints. She didn't know about that Elq person, but Willem definitely had to be somewhere on the ground. Of course, she wasn't optimistic enough to believe that Willem was still his old self. Unlike Nephren, he was pure Emnetwyte. After that black stuff, the soul of the Shiantor, entered him, he wouldn't have been able to maintain his sense of self. She didn't find it too hard to imagine that the Beast had taken over both his mind and body, and that he had transformed into a completely different being.

But still.

Almaria had been counting on her.

Nephren wanted to be by Willem's side. Even if he was now a Beast, she wanted to snuggle up against him. Stranded on the vast ashen earth, Nephren couldn't think of any other wishes she had for the future.

Part 3: An Unwelcome Return

There was a bad guy. Then a strong guy came along and beat him up. Evil disappeared from the world, and everyone became happy.

Many stories start that way, and many more end that way.

Their story, unfortunately, did not follow that pattern. They had no colossal evil on which to blame all the world's misery on, nor did they have the strength to gallantly crush such evil. Their story started at a slightly odd place, and will surely follow their footsteps as they wander through the darkness before ending at their final destination.

In the sky above the 11th Floating Island, an airship with the appearance of a regular civilian ground expedition ship flew within a thick covering of thunder clouds. Overall, the ship showed clear signs of wear and tear. The dust proof boards had developed a peculiar spotted pattern after receiving the necessary treatment to descend to the surface so many times. The left and right propellers differed slightly, and shutters had been drawn down over many of the glass windows on the side of the ship on account of the numerous cracks in them. On its hull, a black cat's face and the words 'Batou Adventure Company' had been sloppy painted on.

If a learned person saw this ship up close, however, he would notice a few strange things in its external appearance. For example, despite the extreme overall filthiness, the dust proof boards looked almost brand new with no signs of damage. Also, the ship's flying seemed relatively stable, even though all its parts seemed mismatched and put together in a hurry. The shutters hanging over the side windows looked so sturdy in contrast with just about everything else. And more than anything, the thunderous roaring it produced obviously belonged to a fairly large burning spell reactor, completely unfitting for a small civilian ship.

In other words, contrary to its appearance, this was no ordinary civilian airship. Its official name was 'Tomorrow Grasper Number 7', and it belonged to the National Defense Air Force fleet of Elpis

on the 13th Floating Island.

Inside the cockpit, a Frogger soldier checked the numerous meters and gauges on the wall with his round eyes. They all stared back mechanically, displaying their usual, stable numbers. Smooth sailing. The airship would arrive at the 11th Floating Island's First Harbor District before daybreak at this rate. After that, they would be able to hand over their fresh plunder to the National Defense Army's researchers.

"Excuse me, officer." The Frogger turned his head around. "I really think we should get rid of that luggage. It'll go against our orders, but it is simply too dangerous."

"Hmph. Did you catch the coward disease?" the Lucantrobos officer said in a mocking tone, baring his fangs.

"No, it's just… a little unpleasant. Especially the ones in the second and third cargo rooms. I've never heard of Beasts that look like that." The Frogger shivered. "We don't know what kind of disaster this may cause."

"There is nothing to fear. We just need to trust the assistant commander and his plan."

At the mention of the assistant commander, the Frogger's eyes shuddered slightly. "No, it's not like I'm doubting him, it's just…"

"In the first place, the ones saying that the Beasts are so dangerous are the guys at the Winged Guard. And they're getting paid to fight those 'dangerous' things. It would be foolish to trust their word."

"… what do you mean?"

"By declaring their enemy to be so dangerous, they can squeeze more cash out of their sponsors. And since they have a monopoly on the battlefield, no one can expose their lies. In other words, they're over exaggerating the Beasts' strength for their own profit."

"But, that can't be!" The Frogger's voice quivered. "Islands have actually been sunk, you know!? My home was on the 15th Island!"

“Of course. If they make it look like they’re winning easily, it would ruin their whole plan. By occasionally letting a few sacrifices through on purpose, they increase the credibility of that ‘dangerous’ label. It’s called acting.”

“But, that–”

“With regards to salvagers being killed down there, what else would you expect from untrained civilians? There’s no reason for experienced soldiers like you or me to fear them any more than necessary.

“Ah…”

“Even if they were dangerous, our barrier techniques currently have them rendered powerless. We’ve already disproved the giant lie that they cannot be controlled.”

The Frogger fell silent.

With a snort, the Lucantrobos continued. “I understand that you’re concerned for the future of Regul Aire. I also understand that you’re worried about bringing forbidden objects into the heavily populated 11th Floating Island. However, you need to think more simply.”

“Simply?”

“Remember the commander’s words. We must fight and claim our future with our own hands. Is there anything wrong with his words?”

“Ah… n-no.”

“Of course not. That is truth. That is justice. And so there is no truth nor justice with the Winged Guard, who monopolize the fighting with the Beasts.”

“That–”

“To carry out righteousness, sacrifices are sometimes necessary. That is the reality which we must not avert our eyes from. And so we must follow that path to the end with bravery. That is the

responsibility and pride of every soldier in Elpis' National Defense Force."

"That…"

That can't be right, the Frogger thought. He sensed something wrong with the officer's argument. However, he couldn't pinpoint exactly what. If he couldn't find anything wrong, maybe it was correct after all, and his hesitation was no more than shameful behavior stemming from his cowardice.

"U-Understood. Please forget what I said earlier."

"I will do that. Glad to see the flame of bravery has been lit in you." The Lucantrobos gave a satisfied nod.

Cargo rooms one through four of that ship all looked almost like fortresses on their own. Many layers of steel plates with a thin coating of enchanted silver on the outside served as walls. Embedded into the floors, wood, mineral, and bone fragments of various colors formed three concentric circles. They represented the sun, the earth, and life, creating a miniature replica of the world all together.

Those rings formed a simple but strong multiple layered barrier. At their core, barrier techniques refer to the ability to create and maintain a wall which partitions off a part of the world itself. Once a barrier is completed, the inside becomes a completely different world from the outside. This causes a slight variation in the rules of the two realms, which in turn forbids any crossing in between them. Walls made in this way do not break, no matter how much physical force may be applied to them. And just like how a wolf in a painting cannot jump out to attack the artist, anything inside the barrier cannot harm anything outside.

Inside one such barrier in one of the cargo rooms, *something* sat curled up on the floor, something which took the form of a black haired markless young man.

"Uu…"

It emitted a low grunt, almost like a scream. It probably realized that it was trapped, and it most likely realized that it would not be able to easily break out. Left with no other choice, it curled its body up and endured its anguish within its closed off little world.

— A sudden impact violently shook the ship.

“What? Don’t tell me that was a floating dragon stone,” the Lucantrobos officer said with a frown.

“No, it was just a regular old rock. Didn’t see it with all these thunder clouds around us,” the Frogger said. Despite the situation, his voice showed no signs of nervousness. He rechecked all the gauges with his big eyes, then said, “No big problem. This is an army ship, after all. An impact of that caliber won’t sink us. Some of the painting on the outside might have come off, and maintenance might complain about it later, but that’s about it.”

“I see. That’s unfortunate. Pleasing them takes more than a normal amount of alcohol. And if we bring those recipes back, then management will get annoyed.”

“Well, I’m sure you can figure something out… hm?”

The Frogger’s fingers grazed over one of the meters. It showed a slight irregularity in the degree of inclination being monitored at various places throughout the ship.

“What’s wrong?” the officer asked.

“Ah… the ship’s frame is probably a little crooked. For a civilian it would cost a hefty amount to fix, but since we’re the army, it should be fine.”

“No no, that means we’re gonna need more alcohol for the maintenance guys.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a–” The Frogger looked up. “Did you hear something just now?”

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

“I thought I heard some kind of crash from over there.” The Frogger turned his gaze to a door. Beyond that door, and down the hallway, lay the second cargo room.

“Are you sure it wasn’t just your imagination?”

“Hmm, maybe.”

The Frogger’s assessment of the situation was correct. The impact that shook the ship was due to no more than a small floating rock, not a bombardment from an enemy ship hidden amongst the clouds, not a spy on board starting to destroy the ship, and not the luggage in the cargo room going on a rampage.

His judgement of the damage was also correct. The impact slightly deformed the ship’s keel, causing small structural distortions throughout the ship. No major flight altering problems could be caused from such light damage. In fact, if a civilian ship received such damage, the repair costs would probably outweigh the merits gained by actually fixing it.

All that was correct. However, the Frogger did not understand the barrier techniques put to use in the cargo rooms very well. He did not know that the Elpis National Defense could not reliably produce such small scale barriers with their current technology. He was not aware that the barrier being used in the cargo room behind him was merely a prototype, not guaranteed to withstand actual usage. He did not understand the unforgiving delicacy needed to create and maintain a whole new world.

The Frogger had read documents. He had knowledge of the barrier techniques. However, he still didn’t really understand them. Well, even if he did, the outcome would not have changed.

Suddenly, a whole one third of the army airship Tomorrow Grasper Number 7’s stern literally disappeared. In one instant, what was once ship simply crumbled into ashen sand before flowing out into the raging storm clouds and vanishing.

Its balance lost, the ship heavily tilted forward. The parts unaffected by the initial burst began to rip apart under their own weight.

Unable to withstand the destructive torque applied to it, one of the propellers tore apart from the ship and went flying off. The burning spell reactor, having lost its pressure outlet, began spewing out explosive flames.

The yells and screams of the passengers only lasted for one moment before fading away into the torrential rain.

And then, the Tomorrow Grasper Number 7 began its descent.

“Look, a shooting star.”

In the southwestern part of the 11th Floating Island lies the great city of Collinadiluche. Despite the heavy storm, there were still a few people gazing up at the thickly shrouded sky. And those few people saw it: a colossal ball of flame blazing bright enough to pierce the clouds.

“A wish, a wish, umm…”

A real shooting star wouldn’t have been visible underneath the dark clouds. However, none of the few people looking up at the sky noticed that. They simply remarked about how bright it was, or how long it was staying.

One of those people, a young Ayrantrobos boy having trouble sleeping, hurriedly made a wish as he gazed in awe at the shooting star through his bedroom window.

“I hope Regal Aire will stay peaceful forever and ever.”

A thunderous noise boomed through the air, followed by an explosive shock wave. Trees fell flat like mere dominoes, while dirt and boulders were violently gouged out from the ground. A massive column of black smoke rose up into the dark stormy sky above. Despite the battering rain, the roaring flames showed no signs of weakening.

“Uu…”

A little ways away from the blazing wreckage of an airship, a young man, or rather something which resembled a young man, landed on the ground. It writhed in pain, not just from the impact of falling from such a high place, but also from the raging destructive impulses gushing up from within his body.

“Ri… to the rim…”

Stretching out its trembling arms, it slowly moved forward by dragging its body across the ground. It understood that it couldn’t be there. But no amount of reasoning could suppress the internal screams of its instincts. The desire to return everything and everyone up in the sky to ashen sand burned within it. It could feel that wish gradually devouring its mind. It needed to throw itself over the rim of the island as fast as possible.

Uncertain of its body’s toughness, it knew that a fall to the ground from such a height could very well mean death. However, if it died, it would never again be able to ascend to the sky, and that was more important than anything.

It didn’t know in which direction the rim lay. The freezing rain and thick darkness enveloping it rendered its five senses utterly useless. It simply crawled forth one arm stroke at a time without thinking.

“… hey.”

A man’s voice weaved in with the sound of the constantly battering rain. Turning to face the source, it spotted a large framed man holding a blazingly bright torch. The man carried another smaller person on his back.

Destroy.

Driven by instinct, it grabbed a branch of a nearby olive tree in its right hand with a snap. In the next instinct, it no longer felt anything in its tightly clenched fist. It released its grip, and a handful of sand mixed with rainwater poured out onto the ground. Then, after a short delay, the olive tree, whose trunk had been half yanked out of the ground, fell over with a creaking sound that resembled a painful scream.

“Don’t… come…”

Whenever something came into view, the urge to destroy it seized control of its mind. It covered both eyes with its left hand in an attempt to resist.

“Run… it’s too… dangerous!” Unable to see, it simply yelled in the direction where the man used to be standing.

“Wow, you really are Willem, huh.” The man’s voice seemed to be drawing closer, not farther away. It clearly heard the sounds of thick leather boots stepping on the muddy ground approaching. “Well, it’s not like I doubted it. It’s just kinda hard to believe so suddenly… and I mean, it’s been five hundred years for crying out loud.” The man seemed to be talking casually to the person on his back.

What are you doing? Hurry and run away. At this rate, you won’t make it in time.

“Don’t… come… closer!”

“… wait, Willem, do you still have part of your consciousness?”

Yes. But not for long. It didn’t have the strength to give that answer, nor did it have the composure to recognize the strangeness in the man’s question.

“Just barely, huh. I see you’re still just as freakishly tough as before,” the man said with a chuckle as he arrived right in front of it’s eyes.

“Yeah, I know, I know,” he said to the person behind him. “It’s not like I want to abandon him either. But would that really be best for him? You know it might just make him suffer even more, right?” A brief silence followed as the man waited for his companion’s answer. “Well, that’s true. Alright, I’ll give in this time, princess selfish.”

Then, with a calm face and tone, the man turned to speak to it again. “Be thankful. My power dried up a long time ago, but, since I’m such a nice teacher, I’ll work my wonders once again for you

guys.” He gently placed his palm on the forehead of the thing resembling a young man. “This is the first and last time I’ll be dealing with a Beast. This is special treatment. Only you get to be put to sleep by my hands.”

It didn’t understand the man’s words, but it finally realized one thing: it knew the owner of that voice. It had once, long ago, somewhere, conversed very intimately with that voice. Once in its life, it had looked up to the owner of that voice with admiration, and maybe that admiration still remained even now in a way. By repeatedly telling itself to never become that kind of adult, it had kept that admiration in its mind.

“Gaze up at the moon on a starless night.” The man spoke with a peculiar intonation, almost as if reciting an ancient poem.

It felt something strange seeping out from the man’s palm as he spoke those words. Intuition told it that something strange, or even dangerous, was occurring. However, it didn’t budge.

“Let the sludge of night envelop your eyes,” the man chanted quietly, as if giving an order.

Then, in the next instant, the young man’s consciousness went black.

Part 4: Battle's End

Time slowly but surely flowed along. The green of the grasses on the roadside deepened, and the trees almost seemed to be competing with each other to bloom their flowers first. The wind whistling by felt a little gentler and warmer with each passing day.

As the seasons changed, the fairy warehouse gained two new residents. One came from a forest on the 26th Floating Island, and the other appeared next to a lake on the 40th Island. The search agency of the Winged Guard picked them up and brought them to the warehouse. At first, Almita and her friends, the youngest generation up until then, rejoiced and caused a great commotion upon hearing the news. Tiat, however, put an end to that, scolding them to act more grown up since they were going to become big sisters.

On the other hand, thankfully, no existing residents were lost during that time. Not a single Teimerre attack occurred since then, so no one needed to head off to battle and sacrifice her life. Kutori. Nephren. Willem. Ever since that day when the warehouse lost those three irreplaceable faces, peaceful times had continued, just like those three always wished for.

"As usual, there have been no predictions of battles," a giant Reptrace said bluntly from the other side of the communication crystal. "Should there be a Teimerre attack in the future, it will certainly be caught by the silver eye. While it may be a brief respite, it looks like the soldiers can continue to rest their blades."

"… I see." Naigrat breathed a sigh of relief.

It was a regular event, but, still, Naigrat always got nervous during her conversations with First Officer Limeskin. However, the fault didn't necessarily lie with him. The topic didn't exactly make for a soothing chat. Her heart could never remain calm at the thought of sending the warehouse's precious children off to the battlefield.

But because their talk was always so nerve wracking, times when Limeskin reported that nothing happened made Naigrat all the

more happier. Only in times like those did she feel grateful for the supposedly perfectly accurate prediction abilities of the silver eyed Prima. Since they declared that there would be no battle, a surprise attack would be inconceivable. The leisurely days at the warehouse would continue for a little while more.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said from the bottom of her heart. “This period of peace is turning out to be pretty long. Before, there would be two or three attacks each month… but there hasn’t been anything for the past few.”

“Mu.” The Reptrace gave an indecipherable grunt before falling silent.

Naigrat ignored that and continued on, fueled by the endless happiness flowing forth from her. “Eudea and the others are doing very well. You know, the new ones that came in last month. They seem to be scared of sleeping alone though, so I stay with them every night. Ahh, their faces when they sleep are so cute I just want to gobble them up, you know?”

“I… see…” The Reptrace’s voice as he mumbled a half hearted response seemed somewhat darker than usual.

Naigrat clearly realized that something had to be off. “What’s wrong?”

“Ah… it is no easy matter to discuss.” Limeskin seemed to be faltering, something very unusual for him.

“Oh, are you talking about that? After the Shiantor disappeared, an expedition was sent down in a rush, right? Did they find something?”

“No, that’s not it. The reports of the expedition are all being kept hidden by someone higher up than me.”

“Eh?”

Limeskin was a first officer. Now, Naigrat didn’t know the structure of the Winged Guard in too much detail, but she understood that first officer was quite a high position. Certainly, information being

withheld from him couldn't have been a normal occurrence. In other words, that expedition found something down there, and that something had to be so significant that not even a First Officer could know about it. That intrigued Naigrat a bit, but apparently Limeskin had another topic in mind.

"It's about the predictions of the battles," he continued.

"Yes?"

"Not just today or tomorrow. Absolutely no visits from Teimerre have been foreseen from here on out."

What? Naigrat gave the communication crystal a confused look.

"For at least a few years. Or perhaps for eternity. That is how long this peace will last."

"At least a few years… eternity…" *What?* Naigrat repeated those words in her head a few times. "Really!?" she asked, leaning right up against the crystal, pushed forward by her overflowing joy.

Eternity was probably a little too much to hope for, but if she didn't have to make those girls fight for more than a few years, there could be no happier news. She didn't want to experience such pain and sorrow any longer, and she didn't want anyone else to experience them either.

"Waah. Waah. Waaah." Odd sounds started to come out of Naigrat's mouth. She desperately suppressed the impulse to hop around the room gleefully.

"… regarding this news, the opinions of the generals, the rank above us officers, is split." Limeskin continued in the same voice. Not a single fragment of happiness showed in his words or on his expression. "Currently, I have no choice but to say that the wind is blowing in an unfavorable direction."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Many are saying that we should eliminate the fairy warehouse."

Naigrat's mouth gaped open. "W-Why?"

"In order for a warrior to remain a warrior, a battlefield is necessary. A warrior who has lost his battlefield and his enemies can no longer gather the reverence and offerings of the people," the oversized lizard explained in a voice that sounded entirely too casual to Naigrat. "When the wind ceases to blow, even the greatest of flags can no longer flutter."

"Why…" The Reptrace's words proved to be as cryptic as ever, but Naigrat had grown used to conversing with him over the years. So, unfortunately, she understood perfectly well the meaning which lay behind those words.

Neither the Winged Guard nor the Orlandri Trading Company were simple hiveminds. Many of their members did not look very favorably upon their use of Leprechauns and Dug Weapons. Naigrat could certainly understood why. After all, they were borrowing power left behind by the Emnetwyte. The survival of Regul Aire literally lay entirely in the hands of a group of markless, who used weapons whose structure and logic were not understood by anyone. Ghosts were in charge of the fates of the living. Much hate was directed towards those monsters which took the shape of children. Not to mention, the buying and gathering of Dug Weapons cost an astronomical amount…

Anyway, there were a multitude of reasons. Various people with various values all found their own rationale to oppose the Leprechauns' existence. The girls continued to be used despite all the resistance simply because they were necessary. Regul Aire couldn't stay afloat without their sacrifices. However, if that necessity were to disappear, things would change. Once the Teimerre attacks stopped, all those people would no longer stay silent. They would throw the arguments and complaints they carried the whole time against the girls.

That must be what Limeskin's talking about. Starting with their instability, the Leprechauns have many problems associated with them. So now that the threat of the Teimerre is gone, people in the Winged Guard are saying to get rid of them. But then…

“If that happens, what will become of the girls? They won’t just be… let free, will they?”

Naigrat knew very well that would never happen. At their core, the girls were no more than walking bombs wearing clothes. And since none other than Naigrat herself was the one putting their clothes on, if the fairy warehouse disappeared they would just be walking bombs not even wearing any clothes… well, anyway, they would never be released into the wild without any supervision.

“A few municipal armies are saying that they want to sharpen their fangs against the Beasts.” Limeskin told the merciless truth. “They have previously voiced their concerns about leaving all the fighting with the Beasts solely to the hands of the Winged Guard and the Leprechauns. To them, this is a perfect chance to get their way.”

“So they want other armies to be allowed to keep Leprechauns? Instead of the Winged Guard gathering all of them like they’re doing now?”

“Ah. There are more than a few voices of agreement within the Winged Guard as well.”

I see. Just by losing their position as the decisive anti-Teimerre weapons, the Leprechauns have turned into nothing more than ‘powerful and unstable bombs’. It’s no surprise that there are some in the Winged Guard who don’t want to deal with their maintenance.

And it’s also no surprise that there are others wanting to get their hands on them. Power makes the people holding it feel safe and those around them feel uneasy. Regul Aire isn’t one big country. The Noble Wings Empire, Elpis Mercantile Federation, Elmwood Tea County, Boreal Woodland… there’s no shortage of islands and cities who desire political and military power to get the upper hand over their neighbors. But that would mean…

“There’s no way I’m handing over our precious children to some other organization.”

Of course, Naigrat couldn’t be certain that all those places were terrible. A pretty nice life might have been awaiting the girls

somewhere. However, none of those places would have had anyone who could pour as much love into the girls as Naigrat did. No way. The enormous amount of time she spent in the warehouse and the many liters of tears she shed there let Naigrat declare that with confidence. She wouldn't hand her girls over to anyone.

"It still has not been decided for certain yet. Do not rush to conclusions," Limeskin warned.

"But it's a very possible outcome, is it not?"

"Do not be hasty. There are many voices of dissent, including mine," he responded sharply. However, he had more to say. "Nevertheless, it would be best to prepare yourself."

Naigrat suddenly recalled a memory from her school days. If she remembered correctly, it occurred during a history lecture. Her Armado professor was talking in his usual hard to hear mumbling voice.

Conflict is the natural fate of all living beings. Peace is unnatural, and thus it is valuable. That which is unnatural cannot be obtained by simply sitting around. Only after expending the necessary effort and paying the necessary sacrifices to suppress instinct and pursue reason can it first be obtained. Precisely because of its difficulty to obtain, peace is seen as such a beautiful thing.

Ah, I see, Naigrat thought after hearing that. *It's precious because it doesn't exist naturally. We have to build it through our own efforts.. Now that I think about it, the same can be said for almost anything. Peace isn't some magical exception*.

At the end of that day's lecture, the professor tacked on one last line, as if he suddenly remembered it. *Unnatural things always come with insurmountable difficulties. Of course, trying to maintain something with insurmountable difficulties necessarily results in great loss. It may seem strange, but the price of peace is far greater than that of war. It's just harder to see where the costs are coming from. That is the reason why since ancient times people have always sought peace but never been able to maintain it for long.*

“… why does it have to be like that…”

After cutting off the communication crystal, Naigrat flung herself face down on her desk. No one but her was in the room. Using that as an excuse, she buried her face in her sleeve and let the tears flow.

“If they don’t need to fight anymore, then why not let them rest? If they can live in peace now, why not let them? Why can’t it just be that simple…”

If it were a fairytale, once the bad guys were defeated and the world returned to goodness, that would be the end. The world would come to a close with everyone living happily ever after, and the future beyond that would remain unwritten. Unfortunately for Naigrat, however, the real world is a little more complicated than in fairytales. Even after one story ends, time keeps flowing onward. That hard earned happiness fades away and scatters. Nothing ends while still in its full beauty.

“… Willem, you idiot…” Her sobs turned into complaints directed towards a certain absent someone. “Weren’t you the one you said that it’s painful to carry this feeling alone… didn’t you promise to share it between the two of us…”

Naigrat realized how pitiful her complaints were, but she didn’t have the capacity to care. No one but her was in the room. Her complains wouldn’t bother anyone, nor would they reach the ears of the person they were directed to.

Part 5: Facing the Past

Recently, Naigrat has been acting a little strange. Staring blankly out a window, looking like she's about to cry, burying her head in her arms, suddenly going off to hunt bears in the mountains… well, no, she always does those things, but… but still, something feels off about her lately. It's hard to put into words, but something's definitely up.

Putting that aside for the time being, Lantolq Itsuri Historia was currently facing a problem of her own.

She baked a pound cake. She had crushed up coffee beans and kneaded them into the batter, added a little brandy for flavoring and some roasted nuts for texture. Making desserts had always been one of Lantolq's hobbies. In the past, she often borrowed a corner of the kitchen and baked up all sorts of sweets for a change of pace on days with no training. She even got really into it for a time. Overall, she had a good amount of faith in her skills.

After finishing this pound cake, Lantolq was almost certain of its success. She had to fight hard to keep a slovenly smile from spreading across her face. With expectations of rabid praise, she handed out portions to all of the little ones.

After everyone had a chance to try their first bite, rather unenthusiastic faces filled the room, as if someone had come and stamped the exact same expression on every one of the girls.

"Something's a little off," Tiat mumbled.

"It tastes like an imitation." Panival struck a painful spot.

"It's bitter!" Collon declared with crumbs stuck all over her cheeks.

Unanimous negative reviews. Lantolq soon realized the cause of her failure. The flavor that she wanted to taste was different from the flavor demanded by the little ones. She had forgotten to take such a simple fact into consideration. If she had just given one thought to the people actually eating her creation, she would have avoided such a novice mistake. Feeling a bit overwhelmed by her incompetence, Lantolq plopped right down to the ground.

“Ah, I think it’s really good! It has an adult taste!” Lakish stood up from her chair and desperately tried to defend the failure of a pound cake.

Lakish really was a good kid, always being considerate of others. Lantolq wanted to give her a hug. However, that kindness stung just a little bit at the moment.

Lantolq tried participating in the little kids’ ball games. The trend at the moment appeared to be a new type of play unknown to her, so first she had to learn the rules. It involved two teams competing to get the ball into the opposing team’s goal. In order to win, a team had to either obtain a certain number of points overall, or have every member of the team score at least once.

“Willem taught us this game. He said it’d be good practice for fighting in a team.”

Hearing that slightly irritated Lantolq, but she didn’t let it show on her face. She didn’t want anyone to know how conscious of that second technician she was, so she held it in. Instead, she made up her mind to dispel that frustration by dominating the game.

It didn’t turn out to be so simple, however. Being a fully grown fairy soldier, Lantolq’s physical abilities far surpassed those of the little ones. So naturally, going all out against opponents with such a great inherent disadvantage would have been very immature. She thought that if she didn’t go easy on them, the game wouldn’t have been any fun.

The kids went all out. And Lantolq suffered a miserable defeat. The reason was clear: one person alone could not score for every team member. Also, strength and speed alone did not do much to help all those teammates score. Skills like teamwork and the ability to keep track of everything going on at once came into play, and Lantolq turned out to be no match for the little kids in those regards.

“The theory is to save the best scorers for the later half of the game. In the first half, they can just play defense.”

“Also, the ability to help a teammate score is more valuable than the ability to score itself.”

“Fighting spirit and guts!”

Words which somewhat sounded like advice piled on top of the defeated soldier. Lantolq plopped herself down on the ground.

“I-It’s okay. I’m sure you’ll get good fast!”

As usual, Lakish tried to cheer her up. She really was a good kid. But, again, that kindness stung just a little.

“Watcha doin’?” Aiseia asked, poking her head out from the playroom window.

“What am I doing… I really wonder…” Lantolq leaned her back against a nearby wall and answered in an exhausted voice.

Despite her personality, Lantolq still held a certain pride at being one of the older ones in the warehouse. As someone who grew up there and served as a guide to the little ones, she couldn’t lose to some guy who suddenly came out of nowhere. With that reasoning, she had declared a silent war against a certain absent someone, but obviously it ended in miserable defeat.

“Still can’t get the technician out of your head? It’s no use fighting someone that’s not here, ya know?”

“No, it’s not that,” Lantolq pouted and faced away.

“Haha.”

“… what? Did I say something funny?”

“Ah, it just brought me back a little. When he first came here, Kutori had a similar reaction.”

Wait a second I won’t allow this I definitely don’t have the same feelings for that technician that Kutori had in fact it’s more of the exact opposite our reactions just happened to coincidentally be similar so you can’t tie us together like that…

“I see,” Lantolq answered quietly, suppressing the urge to yell out her real thoughts.

The sounds of Noft merrily kicking the ball around drifted over to Lantolq on a gentle wind. Judging from those battle cries, Noft had quickly gotten the hang of the game and was going at it with the little ones. In other words, that made Lantolq the sole failure. Overcome by a helpless feeling of defeat, Lantolq slid further and further down the wall until she sat on the ground.

“… by the way, Aiseia. You haven’t been in the reading room recently,” she said in place of a heavy sigh.

Just until the other day, Aiseia Myse Valgalis had been holed up in the reading room and reference room, focusing intently on some kind of research. Lantolq didn’t see her outside those two rooms except to eat, bathe, or sleep.

“Did you finish researching what you wanted to know?”

“Hmm not really finished, more like the opposite…” Aiseia folded her arms on the windowsill, rested her chin on top of them, and let out a long sigh. “I realized there’s a limit to how much I can find here.”

“For resources relating to us and Dug Weapons, if you ask Naigrat, you can have them sent here from the Company. Is it something different?”

Since the fairy warehouse was a Leprechaun and Dug Weapon research facility, at least on paper, management allowed some funds to be spent on specialist books and the like, even ones with doubtful relevance. The research books that Lantolq used when she got into the ancient language, the words that the Emnetwyte once used, for a little originally belonged to Nephren, the reading monster of the warehouse.

“The subject itself isn’t the problem. If I coulda bought them I would’ve right away, but apparently it’s a precious book with only five copies in all of Regul Aire. Not only can you not get it with cash, you need special permission just to have it shown to you.”

“Well… I guess there’s not much you can do then.”

“Yep. Absolutely nothin.”

Lantolq and Aiseia simultaneously let out a heavy sigh. Being weapons, the Leprechauns didn’t have permission to leave the warehouse and walk around freely. Needless to say, no one would have trusted them enough to show them such a valuable book.

“I still don’t think we’re alike,” Lantolq said.

“Watcha talking about?”

“Kutori and I. She wouldn’t have given up so easily.”

“Ah, true true.”

If Lantolq remembered correctly, that’s the kind of girl Kutori Nota Seniolis was. It’s not that she was so dumb she couldn’t understand the concept of impossible. She understood it perfectly well and accepted it. However, she was extremely terrible at getting that truth to work well with her feelings. Her reasoning and emotions clashed together head on, and in the end she always ended up suddenly running off somewhere. Lantolq never saw it as a very smart way to live, but she did occasionally think that it looked like a fun way to live.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to live like that. Well, not that I want to anyway, Lantolq thought, pretending to not notice the sharp pain in her heart.

“Well? What were you researching anyways?”

“Hm, want to know?”

“I guess…” Of course Lantolq wanted to know. She just never found the right moment to ask. After they lost their good friends, seeing Aiseia hold back her tears and silently confine herself to the reference room, Lantolq found it hard to approach her. “Is it okay if I ask?”

“It’s nothing worth hiding. I just wanted to know what exactly we

are."

"… philosophy, huh?"

"No, not in that sense. In a more practical… or physical meaning. The technician said that Leprechauns have existed for a long time, but they used to be pretty different from us now."

"Different?"

"Apparently they were smaller and didn't think about much."

Lantolq looked over to the grounds. She saw very small fairies who didn't look like they were thinking about very much covered in mud and running around excitedly. Also, Noft blended in with them perfectly.

"Ah, different from them too," Aiseia said. "Small like small enough to sit on the palm of an Emnetwyte. Since they were a sort of natural phenomenon resulting from the fragments of a deceased person's soul which mistakenly took physical shape, they were almost like illusions, hard to even touch."

"Uh…"

Leprechauns were a type of ghost, natural phenomena which resulted from a soul who failed to understand its own death and wandered into the world. Lantolq already knew that. Based on that assumption, it also made sense that they wouldn't have a stable body or sense of self. It seemed more natural that such souls would appear as no more ephemeral wisps, like the old Leprechauns which Aiseia just talked about, and which Willem Kumesh once spoke of.

"The materialization of a soul. Apparently, that by itself isn't too rare of a phenomenon. However, the soul of just any regular animal is so small it can't form into anything more than some thin fog," Aiseia continued.

"… that's strange." Lantolq was a bit interested now. "So if fairies are no more than that, how can we explain us?"

"Yep, that's the question. We're ghosts, but we have actual flesh on

our bodies… well, not too much in some cases," Aiseia, eyeing Lantolq's chest area.

Hey! You have way less than me I have a good amount compared to all the other fairies wait no this isn't the time to be talking about that…

"But anyways, I looked over some recent research books, but they didn't say anything too different. Fairies are ghosts, and ghosts have a physical mass very close to zero. Their materialized form is unstable, and they're prone to simply vanishing into thin air," Aiseia continued.

"Well… that makes sense if you think about it. This warehouse is like a dumping grounds for unanalyzed relics of the past. We're creepy and might blow up at any moment, so we got pushed onto this 68th Island out in the boondocks."

"That's true. There was someone who proposed a new hypothesis though. He was a previous manager here."

Wondering if she might have known him, Lantolq started digging back into her memories, but soon realized its futility. Almost all of the managers sent to the warehouse served their entire term without ever showing up at the warehouse. Obviously, she wouldn't have remembered any of them. Only one face popped up at the mention of the title of manager of the fairy warehouse, or second enchanted weapons technician.

"He said that if the soul of any regular animal is too small, then assuming that the original being must have had a ridiculously huge soul resolves the contradiction and explains the existence of the Leprechauns," Aiseia explained.

"Huh?" Lantolq's initial reaction slipped out of her mouth. "What kind of reasoning is that? Even if the contradiction goes away, any sense of credibility just went out the window."

"I mean, we're talking about souls and ghosts. There's no point in arguing whether it's realistic or not at this point."

"We're talking about us, and we're real! Of course it needs to be

realistic."

"Well," Aiseia said with a cheerful laugh. "We're ghosts and monsters… in other words, we're working with the assumption that we're not real."

But…

"If you say that… then there isn't any point to all this, is there?"

"The brief dream of a child who died young. That's what we are. There's no point in averting our eyes from that fact."

That… may be true, but…

"By the way, my… uh, Aiseia's previous life was also a Leprechaun. She lived here around ten years ago, swung the Dug Weapon Pachem around, and died at eighteen."

"… what?" Lantolq stared at Aiseia, only to see her usual hard to read smile.

"And that hypothesis I just mentioned doesn't contradict with my memories. If a Leprechaun is the fragment of a gigantic soul, then it fulfills the conditions to serve as the ingredient for a new Leprechaun."

"Aiseia…"

"Ah, keep this a secret from everyone else, ok? I've lived for a relatively long time, but I've only ever told this to you and Kutori," Aiseia said, then laughed her usual laugh.

Lantolq thought that perhaps Aiseia had forgotten the proper expression to make in times like these.

"Of course, we can't jump to the conclusion that all of our previous lives were Leprechauns. Even if every reincarnation results in the same species, there must be something different if you go back far enough. Whatever's there, that's what I wanted to know."

Lantolq couldn't think of anything to say back.

“Well, since I didn’t get very far, there’s nothing more to say. If the technician were still around, I bet he coulda given me some advice, but he’s not. I originally started researching to see if there was any way to help Kutori. As you can tell, I didn’t make it in time, so there’s not much point anymore.”

Aiseia laughed again. This time, however, rather than a mask which concealed all of her true emotions, it was a melancholy smile, one that almost made Lantolq want to cry just looking at it.

Part 6: Emergency Ground Expedition

The roaring of a burning spell reactor and the whooshing of propellers noisily droned on in the background. The air, disturbed by the rotating blades, blew wildly every which way. Buried in a layer of clouds shaped like thin silk, far above the sandy plains, an airship hovered in place.

The wooden boxes they threw down for observation purposes reached the surface with no problem. Upon pulling them back up with ropes and checking the readings, the crew found no abnormalities. In other words, the area directly below them had not yet come into contact with the Shiantor, which instantly reduced any being that drew near to sand.

“No traces anywhere… at this rate, we can’t rule out the rumor that the Shiantor suddenly collapsed and died,” a young Borgle man muttered as he scratched his bald head. “Actually, I really hope that rumor’s true. If it’s still alive and snuck off somewhere, we don’t know when it might strike again.”

“Hehe. Overcoming anxiety and fear with reason and technology is what it means to be an intelligent life form,” a Gremian said, waving his fingers around. The shoulder of his army uniform displayed the rank insignia of a first technician. “We have set caskets of gunpowder in a wide area surrounding us. They were specially ordered, engineered to produce a large sound upon damage from anything other than a simple impact. That disintegration power of that Shiantor or whatever is activated all the time, right? So if that thing appears, it’ll definitely set off one of our caskets. All we have to do is leisurely move away if we hear a noise.”

“That sure does sound convenient, but what if the enemy crawls up from right below us?”

The Gremian, who had been puffing his chest out proudly, faltered. “… does that Beast tunnel beneath the sand?”

“Well, I don’t know, but when it comes to those guys, it wouldn’t

surprise me if they could. The Shiantor is especially shrouded in mystery."

"W-We can't be expected to prepare for that too. Technology exists to respond to problems which we understand concretely."

"If you say so, that's fine with me." The airship slowly began its descent. Putting on his goggles, the Borgle gazed down at the ashen plains spreading out below. "Problems aren't just going to come and nicely introduce themselves to us. If the situation catches us off guard, the one in a panic is going to be you."

"Ah…" The Gremian probably wanted to say something in return, but just a few months earlier, he had been caught completely off guard by the situation and publicly exposed a shameful side of himself. Reflecting back on that experience, he fell silent.

"Anyway, don't let your guard down. I won't tell you to prepare for any possible outcome, but at least be ready to act."

"… I'll do my best," the Gremian mumbled bitterly.

Looks like he's improving, the Borgle, Grick Graycrack, thought.

Up until just recently, this first technician was not the type of person to heed the words of others. Now, Grick could still see some resistance left in him, but Grick's words seemed to be at least going in one ear and staying, instead of going right out the other. Judging by the fact that the Gremian accepted the role of commander of this expedition, Grick guessed that the events of that day must have been a profound learning experience for him.

That day, when a large swarm of Teimerre attacked and nearly sank the Plantaginesta, they lost much. They lost many lives, bore many wounds, and, more than anything, after seeing those girls fight, they lost the precious asset known as ignorance.

The whole time, they had been protected. Their peaceful days had been paid for in blood by those fairies. They had lived on top of the corpses of those girls who died by the dozens without a second thought. A mixture of guilt and helplessness sunk deep into their

stomachs. Once they knew, they could never return to ignorance.

Grick now understood painfully well why the Winged Guard had kept the Leprechauns and the Dug Weapons a secret. The fewer that had to carry those emotions, the better. Even he, as someone just being protected, felt that. He couldn't even begin to imagine what Willem, that powerless Emnetwyte who wished to protect those girls, felt.

"… that's strange." A few abnormalities came into Grick's view as he glared down at the surface.

"W-What is it? A Beast?"

"No." Grick shook his head. It definitely wasn't the traces of a Beast. In fact, it looked like the opposite: small stones piled in a circle, burned wood, and scattered wooden boxes lying in the shadow of a boulder. "It's the remnants of a campsite." Such well preserved traces on the windy plains meant that it couldn't have been too old. "It looks like someone sniffed out the Shiantor's disappearance and went down before us. I don't know which salvagers it could have been, but they must have had a keen sense of smell."

"What?" The Gremian strained his little eyes to no avail. Their vision wasn't as effective at far distances as the Borgles'. "You don't think they messed with things, do you?"

"I wonder." Grick took off the pair of binoculars hanging around his neck and handed them over. The Gremian snatched them without a word of thanks and gazed down, almost leaning out of the window.

"The K96-MAL Ruins. Traces of the Emnetwyte so well preserved are certainly rare, so it is a pretty sweet spot for salvagers… but…" Grick crossed his arms and furrowed his brows — or rather just creased his forehead as he didn't have eyebrows. "Jumping at the opportunity that fast after just hearing that one Beast disappeared… seems a little strange."

"You're saying the funds wouldn't work out?"

“No, not that… well, actually…” Grick began to deny, but, thinking about it, he realized that the Gremian had a point.

To the Salvagers, just descending to the ground by itself was a huge gamble. Crossing the barrier enveloping Regul Aire cost quite a lot. The fuel and food necessary for a round trip also didn’t come cheap. If they hired anyone outside their group, they needed to deal with the possible risk. Some contracts required the salvagers to hand over money to a specialized office beforehand to be paid to the family of the deceased should anything happen.

Of course, even after shelling out such large amounts of cash to get down there, income was in no way guaranteed. There was no knowing what you would find — that was the romance which the salvagers sought, but also the harsh reality at the same time. Some trips yielded spectacular treasures, and others yielded absolutely nothing of value. Needless to say, the statistics overwhelmingly favored the latter.

So because of all that, all the salvagers, including Grick, had rather peculiar personalities. I could find something good… maybe. Something good might happen… maybe. Even when faced with such uncertain information as that, they enthusiastically felt the need to go down and check for themselves. Anyone who called themselves a salvager had that bad habit, but…

“They moved too fast. The fact that they came down earlier than us means they were observing this area even more heavily than you guys at the Winged Guard,” Grick said.

“Hm?” The Gremian didn’t seem to be understanding.

“It would have cost a hefty amount. In this business, where you have no idea what you’ll find, tossing in funds so suddenly like that is unnatural.”

“Hmmm?”

“In the first place, coming here right after the Beast disappeared is strange enough by itself. Huge risk and no return. All they accomplished was beating the other salvagers here… ah, I see. They

incurred all those risks and costs precisely to get the first move. In other words, they believed that they could recover their losses…"

"Hmmmmm?" The Gremian's little palm gave the Borgle a hard slap on the back.

The impact carried Grick forward, almost pushing him right out the window. "Ow!?"

"You leave me behind and go off into your own little world. Anyways, forget about this. Get ready?"

"… get ready?"

"To descend of course. We can't just sit up here and watch forever. We flew all this way again to get back on the land."

Ah, that's right, Grick remembered. *The K96-MAL Ruins. A place where many Emnetwyte once lived, now no more than a sleeping village. We have business here.*

"Oh, I guess I better check before we do that. What do you think, adviser? You think it's okay for us to go down there?" the Gremian asked.

"Nn… a-ah. Looks like it. Can't see any trouble right now."

"Roger that. Tell the systems manager: retract the second and sixth control wings and prepare for descent! Turn off the auxiliary burning spell reactor for now, but leave it ready for reactivation at any time!" shouting out to the voice transmission pipes, the small Gremian dashed down the narrow corridor.

It felt rather uncomfortable actually being asked for advising, but Grick kept that to himself. He looked down towards the ground.

"… huh?'

He spotted a red dot. Straining his eyes didn't help much, so he put his pair of binoculars to his eyes. Now he could see clearly: it was a young girl with a large red piece of fabric wrapped around her body.

“…… huh?”

Grick tilted his head in confusion. He removed his binoculars, checked to make sure they weren’t broken, then looked once again at the girl walking across the land.

“…… t-the gray haired girl!?!?”

Chapter 3: Everyone, in the Name of Hope

Part 1: Secret Meeting

“Well this is a rather strange turn of events,” a voice mumbled, seemingly unconcerned.

To Nephren, the owner of that voice was the real strange thing. Looking up a little, she spotted some being which looked like a floating fish covered in scarlet and silver scales swimming through the air leisurely. Upon closer inspection, Nephren could tell that the fish’s body was half transparent, meaning it had to be some kind of illusion or ghost. The only problem was why this illusion or ghost or whatever was in this place and chatting casually.

“You know, I can’t really afford to take it easy. I need to hurry up and talk to Ebon Candle then go look for a lost kid,” the fish said.

“I agree.”

Nephren too could not afford to take it easy. She didn’t know about that Ebon or whatever, but she had a lost kid, or rather lost adult, of her own to search for: that troublesome Emnetwyte, always acting strong despite being lonely on the inside, so fragile he could break at any moment, Willem Kumesh.

“– This might sound cruel, but there’s no hope of that, probably,” the flying fish said as it glided around the ceiling.

Despite knowing that only she could see or hear it, Nephren still looked up and asked the fish, “What do you mean?”

“By Willem you mean that black haired and sort of handsome guy, right? He’s not around anymore. I saw him quit being a human and return to a Beast with my own eyes,” she responded, moving her fishy eyes around. “He might still be alive, but he’s completely different from the Willem that you knew. It’d be best to throw away any weird expectations.”

“I don’t mind.” Nephren shook her head. “No matter what Willem changes into, my job remains the same. I need to be by his side.”

Fortunately, the current Nephren didn’t seem to be treated as an

enemy by Beasts, so even if Willem had transformed into one, Nephren could be by his side. Probably. No, definitely.

“No matter how deep your love is, it won’t cause a miracle happen, you know?”

Nephren didn’t understand. Why did the fish use the word ‘love’? That was for children like Kutori. Nephren didn’t want to be by his side because of some bold motive like that.

“… hm? Did you say something, young lady?” the young Borgle man sitting next to Nephren on the sofa asked.

“Just talking to myself.”

Of course, that wasn’t exactly the truth. No one except Nephren could see Carmine Lake or hear her voice, so their conversation naturally sounded like a monologue from Nephren. She already explained the existence of the mystery illusion fish thing, but she didn’t feel like explaining the content of their random conversations too.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nephren said.

“I see… well, I can understand why you’d be restless,” the Borgle, Grick, not trying to hide his irritation, said as he scratched his bald head.

They sat in the reception room of a large airship owned by the Winged Guard. A grand flower design covered the walls, a chandelier hung down from the high ceiling, the thick curtains seemed to be made from expensive fabric, the furniture contained copious amounts of gold decoration… in other words, it was a pretty fancy room, which made it a rather uncomfortable room as well. Like Grick said, it would be difficult for anyone to remain calm in it.

“How much longer do we gotta be stuck in this stinkin’ rich room?” Grick complained.

“Sorry for the wait.” A heavy looking door slowly opened, and a soldier entered the room. A white furred Haresantrobos, he bore the

insignia of a first officer on his shoulder. “The Winged Guard has been in a rather delicate position lately. We had to deal with a bothersome guest.”

“I don’t care about your business,” Grick, clearly in an unpleasant mood, spat out.

“The Winged Guard does not belong to a specific floating island. But this means that in order to survive we must provide support to all the islands. Or at least, that’s what we say officially. Occasionally we get islands who try to use that to get their requests through,” the officer explained.

“I said I don’t care about that. You have something more important to say, don’t you?”

“Hm.” The Haresantrobos gave a small nod. “Very well. It’s a little late for names, but I am Baroni Makish. As you can see, I am a first officer of the military police division of the Winged Guard–”

“I don’t care who or what you are,” Grick interrupted. “There’s only one thing I want to know. Where are we being taken?”

“I don’t recall ever asking you to stay. The only one we need is Dug Weapon user Nephren Ruq Insania.”

Upon mention of her name, Nephren budged slightly. Not only did she not have Insania anymore, a bunch of weird stuff had mixed into her. She didn't have confidence that she was Nephren Ruq Insania anymore. To hear someone still call her by that name made her a little happy.

"I'm telling you to shut that mouth of yours and release that one person!" Grick's fist violently slammed against an expensive looking table. "All he wanted was to get this girl home safely! He gave his

life for that! She has family waiting for her! Why can't you understand that!?"

Grick seemed to be getting heated up. *He's a good person*, Nephren thought. *Despite being a demon*. She could tell that Grick was truly concerned for her as a real child, even though she was no more than a disposable (and already used) weapon.

However, his concern was a bit unnecessary. Sure, the fairies in the warehouse were like family to Nephren, but someone not coming home was an ordinary, almost everyday occurrence. She wouldn't go so far as to say that no one was waiting for her, but certainly there wasn't much meaning in hurrying home. Of course, she didn't say any of that out loud. With those thoughts running through her mind, Nephren maintained her usual emotionless expression.

"Grick Graycrack." Baroni Makish shook his head in disapproval. "According to my findings, you were once in the Winged Guard. You quit after half a year, but you used your connections and resources to start work as a salvager. I hear you were quite capable. Quite unfortunate that you quit."

"That was a long time ago. I've forgotten already," Grick said disapprovingly.

"Nevertheless, it is a fact that you once wore an army uniform, so stop pretending to not understand. Doing so will only make this take more time than necessary."

"This is exactly why I quit." His dissatisfaction clearly showing on his face, Grick threw his back against the sofa.

"… wait. I also want to ask something." Nephren raised her hand. "Where is Willem? I heard an estimate has been made as to his whereabouts."

"Ah, yes yes! Elq too! Ask about her whereabouts too, please!" Carmine Lake's voice, inaudible to everyone except Nephren, rang loudly in her ear. "We're in the world that Ebon Candle made, right? Her presence is too dispersed, I can't pick it up."

"… also, I heard that a small child should have been with him," Nephren added on.

"Ah, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician Willem Kumesh. I don't know about that small child… is that what the illusion you mentioned earlier is saying?"

Nephren nodded.

"We do not know his location accurately. However, we do have a guess. We had doubts about them before, but you guys brought home concrete proof," the first officer responded in a slightly irritated tone, his gaze turned towards Grick.

"Huh? Us?" The Borgle blinked in confusion.

"You've heard of the Elpis Mercantile Federation, yes?"

Nephren nodded.

Grick scratched his head. "It's that place on the western half of the 13th Island, isn't it? Where they worship some giant stone or something as a god. The entry tax is too high, so I've never been there myself."

"Yes, that's the one. Many different races make up its population, but, by only having a single religion, the country has united its people and obtained a high level of public order. Perhaps because of that, its residence have a high level of patriotism, and the government's policies are rather aggressive."

"Okay. Well, what about them?"

"The traces of the campsite and cans of army rations you found on the ground belong to Elpis' National Defense Air Force."

"Okay, but what did those guys do? That's what I'm asking."

"Considering all the evidence, we have strong suspicions that the Elpis National Defense Air Force has transported a number of Beasts into Regul Aire on a disguised airship."

— Silence.

“Eh?”

“Huh?”

Nephren and Grick simultaneously let out voices of disbelief.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. What did you say?” Grick asked.

“I said, Elpis has brought Beasts into Regul Aire.”

— Silence again.

“Why would they do that?” Nephren, first to recover from the shock, asked. “Bringing in a Beast completely violates Regul Aire’s charter. They also surely understand the danger that the Beasts present. In the first place, how does one simply bring home something that’s dangerous to even approach?”

“Simple. For a while now, they have desired the title of ‘protector of Regul Aire’ to use in political negotiations with their neighboring islands. In order to obtain that, they’ve constantly been trying to stick their heads into the battles with the Teimerre which the Winged Guard has kept a monopoly on,” Baroni Makish explained.

“Huh??” Grick’s face only looked more and more confused.

“It’s not that rare of an occurrence. The Winged Guard, with its duty to protect Regul Aire as a whole, occupies a privileged position amongst the armies of Regul Aire. In addition, it has a total monopoly on battles with the Beasts, the information concerning them, and the weapons used in them. There are many who do not think too fondly of that. Those at the Elpis National Defense Air Force are no more than members of that group with particularly short tempers.”

“… why would they choose to get involved with those terrifying things?” Grick asked.

“Simple.” Baroni Makish held up two fingers and lowered them one by one as he explained. “First, that ‘terrifying’ nature is precisely

what will lead to profit for them. Second, because the Winged Guard has a monopoly on almost all information regarding the Beasts, there are very few outside the organization who know that terror first hand."

"For real…" *Not knowing is scary*, Grick thought as he stared up at the ceiling in despair.

"A spy we snuck in reports that they have recently developed a few anti-Beast weapons. Among them are new barrier techniques meant to capture and restrain. In other words, they have the means to bring a Beast home." One of Baroni Makish's ears folded down. "Of course, if word gets out, they will no doubt get criticized for violating the charter of Regul Aire. As for the reason why they would go so far despite knowing the consequences, we cannot say at this point."

"Wait. That's still not an explanation. I asked for Willem's whereabouts."

"I'm sure you can infer based on what I just told you. There is only one conclusion."

For whatever reason, the Elpis National Defense Air Force brought a Beast they found on the ground up into the sky. Willem has now transformed into a Beast. So what does that mean? Ah, I see. It all fits together. There really is only one conclusion. Nephren stood up from the sofa.

"What's wrong, young lady?" Grick asked.

"I'm going to the 13th Island."

"Before that, there is somewhere else you must go," Baroni Makish said.

"Move. I won't ask you to take me. I'll go by myself." Nephren ignited Venom and spread her wings.

"Wait wait I don't think there's any need for that," Grick said in a panic.

“Elpis is vast.” Baroni Makish’s voice remained calm. “How do you plan on finding a hidden army facility in a group of cities large enough to be called a country?”

… burn them all?

“In the first place, it is not even clear what they plan to do with the Beast they brought back. If we rush and act rashly, it will only delay the resolution.”

“That’s… true.” Nephren retracted her wings and sat back down on the sofa.

“If the whereabouts of the Second Technician are discovered, I will report to you as well, so just wait patiently for now.”

“Ok…”

“Us at the Winged Guard cannot leave Elpis alone either. We will conduct an investigation to the best of our abilities. During that, we will most likely find information concerning the Second Technician. At the very least, it should be more efficient than you running around by yourself.”

“Ok… I understand. Thank you.”

“There is no need to thank me.” Baroni Makish turned around and spoke to them behind his back. “You are in a very peculiar condition right now. Taking future developments into account, I judged that it would be worth it to deliberately try to please you, that’s all. Well then, I will take my leave.” With the sound of shoes pressing off the floor, the Haresantrobos disappeared beyond the door, just as he said.

“… was he trying to please me?”

“How am I supposed to know? Ask your mood,” the flying fish retorted.

“Hmm.” Nephren tilted her head.

Nephren closed her eyes, calmed her mind, and asked herself, *Please answer either 'yes' or 'no'. Do you want to destroy Regul Aire?*

After brief thought, she produced the answer 'no'.

It's okay. I'm okay. I haven't changed into something that would answer 'yes'.

It's true that she did feel a certain empty and directionless sense of irritation thrashing around in her chest, but it wasn't violent enough to swallow up Nephren. Most likely, it was the result of her being a Leprechaun trying to replicate an Emnetwyte, and not an actual Emnetwyte. The impulse inside of her which could turn an Emnetwyte into a Beast, or perhaps *re*turn an Emnetwyte into a Beast, could sit and fester but not actually transform her.

However, in Willem's case, things were not so gentle. He was a genuine, purebred Emnetwyte, and moreover had the same amount of the same impulse poured inside of him. Without a doubt, he wouldn't be able to endure it like Nephren.

I saw him quit being a human and return to a Beast with my own eyes.

Nephren didn't exactly trust Carmine Lake's words, but she couldn't firmly doubt them either.

No matter what he turned into, all I need to do is be by his side. That was half Nephren's honest feelings, and half her trying to act strong.

She wanted him to stay just a little longer. After all, he was so kind and hardworking.

He wasn't a lonely existence destined to meet a meaningless end from birth like the fairies.

So, that's why Nephren couldn't help but wish for at least a sliver of salvation for that eternally busy Quasi Brave.

Part 2: Footsteps of the End

Some rather unusual guests came to the fairy warehouse: one Orc wearing a fresh suit and a few brawny beast men, most likely his bodyguards.

“… may I ask who you gentlemen are?”

“My apologies. Here.”

Naigrat accepted the business card handed to her, took one glance at it, and tightened her expression. “Let’s talk outside.”

“Oh? May we not come inside? I hear that currently you are the only manager of this warehouse. There is no one who could overhear us, correct?”

“We will talk outside,” Naigrat repeated firmly. She flung her outdoors coat over her shoulders and stepped out of the foyer, past the Orc man sagging his shoulders. “We will walk to town. That is fine with you, correct?”

“Of course, if you have any recommendations.”

“There aren’t many choices out here in the countryside.” With a calm face, Naigrat began walking, and the men followed after her.

“… this is suspicious!” Collon, sitting at the very top of a tree growing by the side of the warehouse, said as she watched them go, using her right hand as a visor.

“This is the first time I’ve seen Naigrat make that face,” Panival muttered, sitting about halfway up the tree with her back against the trunk.

“They don’t seem so important that Naigrat would have to act so formal like that.”

“Hm. I feel like it’s something else.”

Collon and Panival both tilted their heads in confusion.

“Come down, you two… this tree is dangerous so no climbing it, that’s what our seniors said, isn’t it?” Lakish, clinging onto a fat branch much farther down, pleaded as she looked up to the pair.

“Being born as a woman, I aim high!” Collon pointed to the sky and struck a probably meaningless pose.

“To us fairies, maintaining agility is very important. This is one part of our special training.” Panival nonchalantly strung together some nonsense.

“That’s not the problem… if someone finds us we’ll get scolded.”

“That would be unfavorable. If that happens, let’s leave Lakish behind and run.”

“Yes, we’ll leave the clean up to you!”

“So mean…” Lakish responded, half crying and half laughing.

“Hey, you two!!” Noft’s bellowing came from a second floor window. “No tree climbing until you’re actually scared of falling! How long have we been telling you that!?”

“I told you guys,” Lakish said, almost crying now.

“In order to know fear, we must climb!” Collon declared with her chest puffed out, completely unphased.

“Naigrat just went out with some guests.” Panival forcefully changed the subject in the same nonchalant voice.

“… guests? Who? Noft asked.

“Never seen them before. Naigrat had a rather calm, serious face, something unusual for her.”

“Calm and serious?” Noft, knitting her brow, turned around towards the center of the room she stood in. “What do you think, Lan?”

“I didn’t see her face, so I can’t say anything.”

“True, but doesn’t it make you remember anything unpleasant?”

“It does.”

It happened around seven or eight years ago. Perhaps Collon and the others didn’t remember, or maybe they never even knew about it, but Noft and Lantolq remembered it clearly.

At the time, there was a criminal organization of Orcs. Then, one night, it suddenly vanished. Neither Noft nor Lantolq knew concretely what happened. They were taught that children need to sleep at night, and they didn’t have the courage to oppose that. If they delved deep into their faint memories of that night, they could manage to recall that the faraway howling of beasts was louder than usual, nothing more.

The next day, the way the residents of the island looked at Naigrat changed completely. Instead of viewing her as a dear neighbor, they treated her as a feral predator. Exactly what happened to cause such a drastic transformation, Noft and Lantolq didn’t know, and they didn’t really want to know either.

Lantolq snapped shut the book she had been reading and sighed. “As long as history doesn’t repeat itself, I’m sure things will be fine.”

Downtown, in the usual restaurant. No other customers were in sight.

After bringing everyone their ordered drinks, the waiter, shivering violently, retreated back behind the counter.

“To put it simply,” the Orc said, leaning forward with a smile on his face. “Miss Naigrat. We came here to steal you.”

“… is that so,” Naigrat answered quietly and took a sip of tea. Bitter and horrible. Resisting the urge to spit it all out, she returned her cup to the table.

“I looked into your background. I was very surprised. The number of qualifications you obtained at academy at such a young age, your

grades… you're first rate personnel, no doubt about it. But Orlandri is wasting such a precious resource in this place out in the middle of nowhere."

"… thank you."

Ah, that's right, Naigrat remembered. The path she once set out on was somewhat of an elite course. Obtain a few useful looking qualifications, land a job at a big trading company, steadily gain eminence, make money, meet a wonderful person… She once dreamed about such a dazzling life, and even realized it halfway. However, she got caught up in a little authority struggle within the company and, as a result, got sent to a meaningless position in the borderlands. After that, her mood became a bit unstable from the shock at the sudden derailment of her previously stable life. *The kids in the warehouse at the time must have been scared of me*, she thought with a slight tinge of nostalgia.

"We are different. Needless to say, we plan to give you treatment befitting of your abilities."

"Well thank you. But, why me?"

"Being as wise as you are, I'm sure you can guess. We particularly highly value your skills and experience raising the dangerous Leprechauns, the ultimate weapons of the Winged Guard and Orlandri."

Naigrat focused her willpower to suppress her hand, which threatened to lash out on its own any moment.

"After seeing the barracks with my own eyes, my honest impression is… what could Orlandri be thinking? It looked almost like a run down barn. To me, it seems that Orlandri and the Winged Guard, despite entrusting their very lives all to the Leprechauns, hardly allocate any funds to them at all."

"I'm sure they have their own circumstances up there," Naigrat answered calmly.

Of course, Naigrat knew those circumstances very well. However,

she had no intention of explaining the details to the men in front of her. Besides, they probably already looked into it themselves. There was no need to chat about it.

“Yes, exactly as you say.” The Orc nodded happily a few times. “And due to those circumstances, they will soon abandon their monopoly on the Leprechauns. The time when organizations other than the Winged Guard can obtain those powerful weapons is almost upon us. The company which raises the highest quality Leprechauns will lead that new age.” He spread out his hands, continuing on energetically. “We, the Elpis Mercantile Federation, will take that seat from Orlandri. You are necessary for that. We are prepared to welcome you with first class treatment.”

“You praise me too much. Thank you,” Naigrat answered casually, no friendly smile on her face. “By the way, if I were to decline this offer, what do you plan to do?”

“Well, hypothetically speaking, of course…” The Orc stroked his chin. The beast men sitting to his left and right stood up roughly. “They are skilled at getting women to obey a wish. However, I personally am not fond of that method. Please do not make a foolish decision.”

“Oh?” Naigrat glanced at the beast men — then, for the first time during their talk, smiled. “My apologies. I can’t stand people whose flesh don’t look very tasty.”

“Do it.”

In the blink of an eye, the Orc’s face turned dead serious. At his orders, one of the beast men began to move. He kicked over the table, then, stretching out his right arm, swollen like a fat puppy, grabbed Naigrat’s neck. Holding that position, he gradually tightened his grip.

From behind the counter, the waiter let out a high pitched scream.

“Ah, how rude of us.” The Orc turned towards the counter and shrugged. “I’m afraid this may get a little noisy. We will repay the cost of any broken tables and chairs at double the price.”

“How generous of you,” Naigrat remarked.

“Important business gets appropriate funds. Those who refuse to part with spare change will never obtain larger wealth. We are different than Orlan… dri?”

Naigrat’s face remained calm as ever. The Orc finally noticed that. That couldn’t be possible. How could a delicate markless remain calm while being strangled with the strength of a beast person? Her breathing should have stopped, and she shouldn’t have been able to speak. The Orc’s dumbfounded stare shouted those objections.

“Why so surprised? You investigated my profile, did you not? You should have known that I’m a Troll.”

“W-Well, yes, but…”

“Did you not know what kind of race the Trolls are? Did you figure they couldn’t be scary since most of the markless have weak body types?” Naigrat couldn’t tell if the Orc’s stupefied face was confirming or denying. “I thought it was a rather well known fact. We’re just a teeny bit tougher and stronger than the others. If you’re really trying to recruit someone, you should properly study up, okay?”

With a cheerful smile, Naigrat laid her hand on the arm of the beast man gripping her neck. Her finger gradually sunk into that mass of steel like muscle. The beast man let out a scream.

“… oh, you said you were going to pay for everything that breaks in double, right?”

“Eh? Ah… eh?”

“In that case, I can rest assured.” Naigrat turned towards the counter, at the violently shivering waiter. Fortunately, he knew very well what kind of race Trolls are, so Naigrat figured he would understand. “Tell the owner, when the new restaurant is finished, I’ll come to celebrate.”

Confusion showed in the Orc’s eyes. *What do you mean by ‘new restaurant’?* they seemed to ask. However, that question never got

put into words, nor did the necessity for that arise. The answer unfolded right in front of his eyes.

Thud. The Troll lightly swung her arm. It didn't seem like she put much power into the motion, but one of the beast men went airborne, colliding into another man standing beside him before flying off together. A few of the sturdy, thick wooden tables collapsed and shattered as if fragile glass sculptures.

"Huh?"

With feral howls, the other beast men jumped onto the Troll. Their minds now realized that the person in front of them was not some frightened woman, but a terrifying monster. Judging that she couldn't possibly beat them all in terms of pure strength, they grabbed her arms and tried to pin her against the floor. If they accomplished that, she wouldn't be able to break out with pure strength alone.

"Oh, how passionate." The Troll swung her arm again.

Another beast man went flying, this time straight up into the ceiling, head first. Their difference in physique. Their difference in level of martial training. All those elements which usually produce drastic differences upon the battlefield seemed to be of no use to the men.

"A-Ah…" The Orc went limp and fell to the floor.

Looking at that figure, the Troll let out a kind, gentle, and terrifyingly charming laugh.

A scream. A yell. A breaking sound. A smashing sound. Another scream.

And just like that, on that day, a restaurant disappeared off the face of the 68th Floating Island.

"I heard the report." The Reptrace's face seen from across the communication crystal was as hard to read as ever, but it looked somewhat disgusted. "Looks like you really made a mess."

“It was their fault,” Naigrat replied nonchalantly. “They treated our precious children like tools. That deserves ten thousand deaths. Oh, also, a bunch of large men tried to make a woman do their bidding by force. If you think about it, that deserves a little punishment too, doesn’t it?”

“Only you would think of that order.” Limeskin snorted. “Anyway, there is something I must tell you, and something I must ask of you.”

“… huh?” Naigrat frowned. “If you have something to say, I’ll listen now, and if your request is something I can do, then I’ll do it.”

“We have a pest.”

Pest? … are we being eavesdropped on? Our conversation over this communication crystal? By who? How?

The crystal they were talking over existed for the specific purpose of facilitating important contact between the army and the trading company. If others could easily listen in on it, it would be an entirely pointless object. Was eavesdropping really possible? If so, by what means could it be done? Naigrat couldn’t see any signs of panic on Limeskin’s face (probably). In other words, just being eavesdropped on by itself didn’t present any danger to them.

Then, Naigrat understood. *Ah, that’s what he meant*. As she thought, their line of communication couldn’t be easily externally spied upon. The answer, then, was simple: someone else was listening internally. The ‘pest’ belonged to the Winged Guard, and was standing right next to Limeskin. The Winged Guard was by no means one large hivemind. Especially when it came to the Leprechauns, opinions were split. Even among his comrades in the same organization, there were those who couldn’t be considered Limeskin’s allies.

“Is it something we can leave alone?” Naigrat asked.

“I do not know. This decision cannot be wrong. That’s why I want to ask you.”

“Understood.” Naigrat gulped. “You can say anything. It’s okay if you make it hard to understand.” Even she, after knowing him for so long, still struggled to understand Limeskin’s peculiar way of expression. But if they could utilize that, they might be able to get past the eavesdropper.

“Come to Collinadiluche.”

“Huh?” Now of all times, he stated his request in extremely simple terms.

“Yes. Also, bring all fully grown fairy soldiers capable of battle with you.”

“W-Wait a second. Those kids too? For what reason?”

“… I do not have a plan. I leave that to you.”

“Wait!”

The fairies were weapons owned by the army and Orlandri. Even though the possibility of that situation soon changing existed, that was their current status. The fully grown fairy soldiers in particular served as keystones of the military force protecting Regul Aire. They couldn’t just casually be brought around everywhere. There needed to be a proper reason, usually orders within a military operation.

If Naigrat, an employee of Orlandri, left the island with Aiseia and the others without permission, that would give some of the guys in the Winged Guard another argument to make against the fairy warehouse. In the long term, it would no doubt only shorten the lifetime of the warehouse.

“I will be waiting there as well.”

… ah, I see.

Of course, Limeskin knew that the move would produce unfavorable results in the long run. Him knowing that and still insisting on Naigrat to go meet him could only mean that he judged that it was necessary. Could the imminent situation be that tense?

Was there already no need to think about the long term? Naigrat didn't want to believe that.

"Understood. I'll do what I can." Asking for more detailed information now would be pointless. She decided to wait until they met in person. "… we finally don't need to talk about battles anymore, but it seems we can't have a cheerful conversation." She threw in a little complaint before cutting the transmission.

"When the enemy in front of their eyes disappears, people search for their next enemy among their neighbors…" Surprisingly, a complaint came back in return. "Most likely, everyone knows without realizing it: peace is the most terrifying disaster of all."

Now, Naigrat was left with quite a difficult problem. Bring along every fully grown fairy soldier with a sword… which meant Aiseia Myse Valgalis, Lantolq Itsuri Historia, and Tiat Shiba Ignareo. Noft was a fully grown fairy soldier, but, her affiliated Dug Weapon Desperatio having been lost, she no longer held a specialized sword. Naigrat didn't feel safe just leaving the small ones on their own, so maybe it would be a good idea to leave the older Noft with them… she didn't feel particularly safe about counting Noft as an elder either, but she decided to avert her eyes from that fact.

With that decided, all Naigrat needed to think about was the excuse. She needed some kind of justification to bring the entire reserve of strength protecting Regul Aire off to Collinadiluche, no matter how forced it sounded.

"Hmm…"

Deep in thought, she strolled down the hallway. *What about shopping? No, that won't do. What kind of shopping would require a trip from the 68th Island all the way to the 11th? If I was told to do my shopping somewhere closer, I wouldn't have a good response.*

Okay, what about sightseeing? Collinadiluche is one of Regul Aire's most spectacular ancient cities. There are plenty of unique landmarks there. That would be impossible to do at any other island… but I guess permission for a vacation isn't going to go through.

What else is there? Apply for a mock battle with the soldiers stationed in Collinadiluche? No, I wouldn't be able to use that excuse until after the request actually got accepted. Try forcing a mock battle first and get permission later? No, that would just lead to war.

Agh. What to do…

As she racked her mind for ideas, Naigrat wandered into the kitchen and poured herself some tea. It turned out rather sour, maybe because she had been half lost in thought while she made it, but, well, it was better than what she drank earlier in the day. Deciding to calm herself down for the time being, she began to take a sip, when she heard a voice.

"U-Um, is now a good time?" An orange haired little fairy, Lakish, stood beside her.

"… ah, sorry. I'm just thinking about something."

"Oh… ok, sorry." Lakish's shoulders drooped. "I'll come back later."

"Aaah, wait a second. Sorry. I messed up my priorities." The guilty feeling welling up inside of her accelerated Naigrat's mouth. "Putting you guys second won't do… what's wrong?"

"Ah, is it okay?"

"Of course. What is it this time? Did Collon break another window or something?"

"No, this time it's about me."

"Oh?"

That's unusual, Naigrat thought. The young fairies were, as a general rule, all innocent and straightforward, simply energetic and nothing more. Lakish, however, was one of the few exceptions. She stood by the others as they ran wild and took on the role of controlling them… ignoring whether or not she actually succeeded in doing so, she at least tried to control them. Naigrat couldn't recall a time when Lakish came to report something about herself.

“What happened? Did you break a plant pot or something?”

“No, um, it’s not something like that.” After mumbling evasively, Lakish seemed to steel her resolve. “I had a dream.”

“… hm?” For a moment, Naigrat didn’t understand what she meant.

“I had it while I was napping earlier. I was in this really dark place, surrounded by all sorts of lights. Those lights were like books… I could read them, and… ah, I can’t explain it very well.”

Umm, oh. “Could it be that ‘special dream’?”

“Ah, yes!” Lakish’s speech became a little more energetic. “There’s no doubt about it. When I woke up, I knew immediately. That’s what it was.”

When the young fairies grew to a certain age, without fail, they had a certain dream. In it, they went to places they had never been before, saw sights they had never seen before, and talked with people they had never met before. That kind of dream. Yet inside that illusory world, they felt a strange and strong sense of reality. And the moment they woke up, for no apparent reason, they became convinced: the dream was special, and in it they had connected with something very important. That dream signaled the end of their youthful days and the beginning of the path to becoming a fully grown fairy.

“…”

A young one had the special dream. What did they have to do next? Treatment. In order for her to become a fully grown fairy soldier, they needed to take data and fidget with her body.

“Ah.”

“Ah?”

And in order to accomplish that, Lakish needed to be brought to the treatment facility in Collinadiluche. Accompanying her was, obviously, related to Naigrat’s duty as the manager of the fairy warehouse. In other words, she now had a justification.

“That’s it!” Overcome with emotion, Naigrat leaped forward and embraced Lakish.

“Hya!?”

Of course, a full strength embrace would end up snapping Lakish’s body in half, so Naigrat hugged her gently, as if touching a marshmallow, but firmly enough to not let her prey escape. The ultimate hug, a skill which Naigrat had acquired after much blood, sweat, and tears.

“Lakish, you really are a thoughtful girl! I love you!”

“Eh? Eh? Eh?” Lakish fell into deep confusion.

Part 3: The Man Without a Past

It felt like rising up out of a puddle of sticky, heavy mud. As he lifted his body, some black substance covering his skin slowly flowed off. However, it did not leave completely. It gathered at his feet, refusing to go away.

— That was what he felt the moment he woke up.

“Ung…”

Gradually, he opened his eyes. A single horizontal slit of light pierced his pitch black field of view. Inch by inch it widened, until it eventually turned into the face of a small girl peering at him from an extremely close distance.

“… eh.”

“Ah.”

Their gazes met straight on. The girl’s scarlet eyes blinked once. Her serious expression slowly transformed into a broad smile.

“Wi…”

Wi?

“Willem, you’re awake!”

“… huh?”

His head didn’t seem to be functioning well. Haphazard thoughts of unknown origin swirled around the inside of his skull, rendering him unable to even try to remember anything. *What is ‘Willem’?* The word felt very familiar, yet at the same time had a sort of uncomfortable ring to it.

“Nils, come here! Willem’s awake!” The girl turned around and, while hopping up and down in place, called out to someone in a loud voice. Her soft looking long red hair shook about.

“Ah, I can hear. Don’t shout, you’ll disturb the neighbors.” An exhausted man entered the room, scratching his head sluggishly.

Room. He looked around once more: a well cleaned and maintained room, most likely part of an inn. The furnishings, including the bed he had been put to sleep on, were neither luxurious nor shoddy. He guessed the nightly rate to be around thirty bradals, or perhaps a little higher, since he could tell just how well the place was cleaned from a brief glance.

Well, that doesn’t matter right now. A dull pain plagued the area around his forehead. His thoughts refused to get in line. Useless musings came to the forefront while the important things remained ignored.

“Hey, Willem.” The man, now standing beside his pillow, greeted him with a smile that concealed whatever true feelings which lay beneath it.

“… Willem?” he asked.

“That’s right. It’s your name. Did you forget?”

Willem. Willem. I see. This is my name. His ears certainly did seem to feel some sort of closeness with it. However, if he had to be told his own name…

“Did I lose my memory?” he asked.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized how odd his question must have sounded. Only he would know whether or not his memories had gone missing. At the very least, it wasn’t something to ask others.

“Yep.” Contrary to his expectations, the man gave an affirmative response. “To explain things simply, something very bad is haunting your memory and personality right now. If it surfaces and remains unchecked, your body will be done for. That’s why I used my great skills to directly put a lid on the majority of your memories and seal it in. It was a makeshift emergency treatment, but, being my work and all, it won’t break easily. Thank me after you finish crying.”

“What part of that was simple?”

“Shut up. Who was the one who showed up in front of me suffering from such a difficult condition?”

He didn’t have a comeback to that. “… I’m guessing you mean me? I don’t remember though.”

“You and this one. You two brought a real headache over to me.” The man’s large palm gave the girl from earlier a slightly rough pat on the head.

“Ow! Ow!”

“Don’t worry about it, you won’t die again from something like this.” He ruffled the girl’s hair.

“No! Ow! Stop!”

“Hahaha, okay okay.”

Willem, still on the bed, rose the upper half of his body. His arm moved at a speed untrackable by the eye. It swatted away the man’s hand and pulled the girl in close to him. The girl’s light and small body landed on top of Willem’s chest.

“Ah!” A small scream.

She’s cold, Willem thought. Usually, kids this size had rather high body temperatures. “I don’t know what’s going on here, but you should stop. She doesn’t seem to like it.”

“… okay,” the man answered, slightly bewildered. For some reason, his eyes showed a gentle look, almost as if he were feeling some sort of nostalgia at their exchange.

Meanwhile, the girl inside Willem’s arms had become speechless, stopped breathing, and started blushing and blinking rapidly. She didn’t seem to be particularly against it, so he figured he would stay in that position for a bit longer.

“Well? From what you said earlier, I’m guessing you did something

to this kid too?"

"Don't make that scary face. At the very least, I didn't do anything that she wouldn't like."

"What are you talking about? You were hitting her just now."

"That was just a friendly pat on the head. No need to be all suspicious about it."

"Given that you were the only one smiling, I'm not sure if I buy that." Willem glared at the man.

"You really don't change…" the man said for some reason. "Well, whatever. She's a moving corpse. What's called a low class ghost, believe it or not." He pointed at the girl.

"Huh?"

"Originally her body was supposed to be undying, but because of an annoying curse, it's practically a regular corpse now. I used my super special powers to directly lift just a teeny bit of that curse, allowing her shattered in half soul to slip through that crack. So basically, a slight revival, with about one percent of her body and half of her soul."

"I have no idea what you're saying."

Corpse? Ghost? Undying body? Soul? Those aren't words you hear everyday… probably (He couldn't say for sure due to his lack of memories). At the very least, none of those words seemed to be very fitting for the small girl inside his arms.

"If you don't believe me, take a look. The cut through her heart still hasn't healed."

"Huh?" *What the hell is this man talking about?* Willem thought, but he decided to do as the man said anyway. Giving the neck area of the girl's shirt a slight tug forward with his finger, he peeked down through the gap. A large sword wound deeply carved into the girl's chest met his eyes. It was undoubtedly fatal. No proper living being would be able to move around while suffering from it. "Wha…"

“See? I told you. Sometimes I say the wrong thing, but I never tell a lie.”

Willem didn’t think that was something to proudly declare, but he put that matter to the side for the time being. *What in the world is going on here?* He took another look at the girl’s chest. *Hm?* He looked back up at her face, which had somehow turned bright red despite her lack of a functioning heart to pump blood. Tears were welled up in her eyes, ready to fall at any moment. By the time Willem figured out the reason, it was already too late.

“Pervert!!”

The girl’s hands descended upon both his cheeks at once.

Off to the side, the man laughed heartily.

“What’s so funny,” Willem snapped.

“Your face right now, obviously. It’s pure red. You should look in a mirror.”

Willem could imagine it, so he didn’t feel the need to check. Instead, he looked over at the door which the girl dashed out of. Thinking back on the situation with a calm mind, he recognized his failure. Even with such a small kid, or perhaps especially with such a small kid, girls are still girls. He should have treated her more carefully.

Wait no, is it because she’s still a corpse even though she’s girl? Or is it because she’s still a girl even though she’s a corpse? Why is a corpse moving in the first place? What the heck is an undying body? Damn it, I have no idea what’s going on.

“… well, putting that aside for now, time for serious talk.” The man dropped the tone of his voice. “How much do you remember about yourself and anything else?”

“About me…”

Willem thought for a bit. Based on the fact that they were currently

conversing, apparently he hadn't forgotten the common language of Regul Aire. Taking a look around, he confirmed that he had no problems remembering the names of the various objects in the room.

However, when it came to information about himself, his mind went blank. Where did he live? With who? Doing what? What did he like and dislike? None of that sort of information popped into his head. When he tried to force himself to remember, it felt as if he were trudging through a bottomless swamp. Still, he forced his hand down into the depths of that swamp — someone looked back at him with a lonely smile.

"Ah?!" He pressed his hand against his forehead, suppressing the sudden headache.

"Stop it. I sealed it on purpose. Best not to try and force it," the man said with a sigh. "Right now you're on the line between being able to remain as you and not being able to. If you take one step forward, you'll trip and fall. What was once you will disappear. If that happens, not even I'll be able to do anything. You hear? If you want to live, don't remember anything."

"… there might've been something I was supposed to do." As Willem continued to suppress his forehead with both eyes tightly shut, his headache gradually weakened.

"Give up." The man shrugged. "I'm not just trying to piss you off, you know? I don't know what you're trying to remember, but the instant you do, you'll become not you. And a you that's not you won't be able to accomplish whatever it is you remembered. In other words, either way you won't be able to carry it out."

The man's reasoning made sense. Except for an emotional outlash, Willem saw no way to counter argue. However, those emotions didn't come. He couldn't do anything.

"… ahh." For some reason, Willem felt just a little bit of relief. Perhaps being told that he didn't have to remember his past, that he didn't have to take on those forgotten burdens, granted some part of him salvation.

The headache had now faded away, but his head and stomach still felt heavy. He threw his head back onto the pillow. “I’ll follow your word. I don’t remember what happened, but it looks like you really did take care of me.”

“For now, just rest a little more. Next time you wake up, I bet that messed up head of yours will be feeling a bit better.”

Droziness suddenly took hold of Willem. “… ok,” he answered faintly. “Oh yeah, there’s something I forgot to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Your names. You and the kid.”

“Hm… yeah, that’s right. Completely forgot,” the man said while scratching his head. “I’m Nils. The little one is Elq. And you are Willem.”

Nils, and Elq.

“Both names sound familiar. Were we acquaintances before?”

“That’s right. You once adored me and called me master,” the man said with his chest over exaggeratingly puffed out.

“No, don’t think I believe that one.”

“Why not!? I’m not lying!”

“No, no, it’s just too unbelievable. I mean, you really don’t look like the type of person to teach anyone anything.”

“It’s the truth! Why is that the only thing you don’t believe!?”

“Human virtue.”

“How do you know that old saying of yours?! Is your memory really sealed up!?”

Willem himself found that strange. He recognized that his attitude wasn’t one appropriate for a first meeting, but jabbing back and

forth at each other like this felt eerily comfortable, as if he had returned to his distant homeland after a long absence.

“Rather than a master, you seem like a rotten old dad.”

“… geez, you really…” Nils sighed deeply. “Nevermind. I’m gonna head out so rest well.”

“Thanks, for everything.”

“If you’re gonna apologize do it first, geez…”

Even though he could only see his back, Willem knew that the man was smiling bitterly. Judging by the fact that he didn’t turn around, maybe he was even embarrassed.

“– Ah, that’s right.” Standing just beside the door, Nils added, “Don’t use your right eye too much. My seal only works on the parts of your mind which transformed, not the parts of your body. If you let it take over you, the seal will loosen.”

“Right eye?”

“See for yourself. There’s a mirror over there.”

The door shut, and Nil’s footsteps faded away into the distance. Where he last gestured to with his chin before leaving, Willem found a small mirror, about the size of his palm, standing on a table. *What’s he talking about?* Willem grumbled to himself, but he couldn’t ignore something like that. He dragged his eager to sleep body out of bed, took the mirror, and turned it towards his face.

“…”

The face of a black haired young man which seemed to lack any ambition reflected back at him.

Point of note number one: red swells in the shape of small palms lay on each cheek.

Point of note number two: his right eye, and his right eye only, was shining with a fierce golden color, like that of a wild beast. Since

his left eye shared the same black as his hair, Willem figured that his right eye hadn't always been like that. Most likely, it served as proof of whatever Nils was talking about.

"… I see."

Just looking at that golden color, anxiety overcame him. It definitely didn't mean anything good. Having convinced himself of that, he shut his right eye, slipped back under the blankets, then softly closed his other eye as well.

"If you're looking for Nils, he left early this morning," the owner of the inn — a markless man, strangely enough — told Willem the next morning.

"Huh?"

"He's gone on a bit of an outing, apparently. Said he doesn't know whether or not he'll be able to come back. Also said to keep healthy."

"Wait a second. I haven't heard anything about this."

"He's the type to leave as soon as he gets the idea. Judging by his words, he might come back on a whim, but who knows when."

"Wait wait wait wha?"

What kind of vagabond is that guy? Maybe Willem, as the one who got saved, didn't have the right to say anything, but he really wished Nils thought a little more about the ones he left behind. Willem had no recollection of his own past, nor did he have any kind of assets. Normally, one wouldn't leave a guy who didn't know left from right and up from down all by himself. Or at least, Willem would be too scared to do it. Apparently he had once called that man master, but Willem still didn't believe it. He couldn't imagine himself looking up to such an irresponsible man.

"Ah, it appears your companion is also awake."

Who? Willem thought and turned around. He spotted the red haired

girl, Elq, peeking out from around a corner in the hallway.

“Companion?”

“That’s what I’ve been told.”

I see. That’s how Nils explained it. Without me knowing. His irritation at his supposed savior only increasing, Willem casually gestured toward the girl. After slight hesitation, Elq came out from behind the corner and jogged over.

“G-Good morning…” she said.

“Sorry about yesterday.” Willem bowed his head in apology.

“Ah… o-okay. As long as you understand… I mean, I’m not really angry anymore…” she mumbled, clearly flustered.

“I see. You’re a kind girl.” Willem raised his head and smiled. For some reason, Elq groaned softly and took half a step back. “What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing.”

Willem rarely saw such an unpersuasive ‘nothing’. He thought about pursuing the matter further, but decided to stop, figuring such antics were too immature. Apparently, the two of them had been found close to each other. Then, they were both saved in the same way by Nils, then left behind in the same way by Nils. He had no idea how long they would be together, but he figured it would be best to get along. Probably.

First came preparations for living a brand new life. Willem needed to figure out what he was and was not capable of. Then, he needed to search for work. Elq still being young, he needed to somehow make enough to support her as well. Also, Willem decided that if Nils were to come back, he would throw a complaint or two his way.

“By the way, I still haven’t received your room fare for last night. How will you pay?”

Willem slightly revised his previous thought. If Nils came home, on top of a complaint or two, he would throw a punch his way too.

"… have any idea of a place around here that would hire a markless who doesn't know who he is?"

"Let's see… there is one place that comes to mind."

There is? Willem didn't actually expect an answer.

"By the way, the job provides three meals a day, and the small lady can come along too."

"What…?"

"I am Astaltus, the owner of this inn. We are a small place, but there is much work to be done, so please prepare yourself." The man held out his right hand, asking for a handshake.

That bastard. He left us while having this all planned out, didn't he. Willem lamented his having no choice but to go along with the man's kind offer.

"… alright. I'll do my best." Fighting the urge to deeply slump his shoulders, Willem gripped the man's hand in return.

Part 4: The Old Capital and the Fairies

The fairy warehouse was located on the 68th Island. On the other hand, Collinadiluche was located on the 11th. Put simply, one sat towards the outer edge of Regul Aire, while the other sat right in the middle. Naturally, a sizable distance separated the two. Furthermore, due to the lack of a convenient direct route between them, one had to be ready for a roundabout journey involving transfer between more than a few airships.

Of course, getting an army patrol ship to swing by would have solved the problem, but they were generally cramped, they had no vibration buffers so the rocking got out of control, the windows were small, and being on the same ship the whole time felt depressing. For these reasons, among others, Naigrat quickly declined. Needless to say, there were no objections. And so, they spent a whole day on airships, being rocked back and forth by the wind.

“Oohh…” Lakish, after just disembarking, looked around with a broad smile. “A-A-Amazing! Hey, Tiat, look look!”

“Yeah, amazing, amazing. Now let me go.” Tiat, her shoulders being shaken about by Lakish, struggled to break free.

“But, look! It’s the real thing!”

“I know, I know it’s the real thing, so just let me go.”

“Wooow…”

Lakish had completely entered a trance. Well, Lantolq could understand. After all, they were in Collinadiluche. The treasure box of the sky. The frying pan of dreams and romance. Generally, the fairies weren’t even allowed to freely leave the 68th Island, so the stories of books and crystal movies provided their only means for learning about other islands. Serving as the sparkling center stage of countless stories was none other than Collinadiluche. Right here in this city, “Second Mantle” stole one million bradals from the villains, “Rust Nose” found true love, the “Minchuet” family went

through times of great turmoil… for years, the fairies viewed all those tales with eyes of admiration. It only made sense that Lakish, standing on that stage with her own feet for the first time, felt so overwhelmingly happy. To be honest, Lantolq herself was pretty excited, even though it wasn't her first time.

"… so, where do we go now?" Thinking it disgraceful to let the excitement show, Lantolq took a deep breath then calmly asked Naigrat.

"Let's see, we need to end up at command headquarters, but before that we need to drop Lakish off at my senior's place."

"Senior?"

"He took care of you guys too when you became fully grown. The big Kikuroppe doctor. He was my senior at medical school."

"A pretty terrifying combo, huh? I bet your classmates were scared the whole time until graduation." Aiseia butted in from the side.

"How rude. We didn't do dangerous things that often."

A denial that wasn't quite a denial came back in response. Lantolq figured it would be best to not dwell on the subject. "… come on, Lakish, Tiat. Let's go." She grabbed both the shaker and the shakee. "We didn't come here to sightsee. Let's do what we need to do."

"Ah… s-sorry." Lakish snapped out of her trance and apologized.

"Ooo, the island is spinning…" Meanwhile, Tiat's eyes were spinning out of control. Lantolq figured she would recover sooner or later.

"Well then, let's go," Naigrat said, then readjusted the huge backpack she carried.

From the top of that sturdy leather pack, a few pointy objects wrapped in cloth stuck out. Inside were four Dug Weapons… Aiseia's Valgalis, Lantolq's Historia, Tiat's Ignareo, and, as a good luck charm, one more sword without an owner. All together, the weight amounted to that of a small dresser (filled with clothes), but

the way Naigrat carried it didn't show that at all.

"Behave yourselves, you two. It's a bit of a walk to where we need to be, so don't go off looking at things and get lost, okay?" Lantolq said.

"U-Understood. I'll do my best," Lakish responded.

The fact that she had to try her best made Lantolq a little uneasy, but she liked the can do attitude.

"… not even just a few detours? There are a lot of places I didn't get to see last time…" Tiat said.

Lantolq wished this one would try a little harder. "Don't make me repeat myself. We didn't come here to sightsee," she said in a stronger tone with her hand on Tiat's back.

Tiat immediately fell silent. Lantolq wondered if she went too far, but she couldn't think of anything to say. Well, since Tiat was a proper fully grown fairy soldier now, Lantolq figured she could at least restrain herself… probably.

"Aaaah, I-Is that Falsta Square? The thing in the middle is the statue of the Great Sage, right? Can we go get a closer look!?"

Lantolq turned to look. A wide, open plaza with a fountain. Countless couples and an imposing statue of an old man wearing a hood. The Great Sage, the legendary figure who lead the founding of Regul Aire and still continues to support it… somehow, his statue got a reputation for having the power to strengthen the bonds between a couple. The truth of this remained unclear, but, apparently, lovers didn't care either. Throughout the plaza, couples of various races whispered words of love to each other. Even without a ban on detours, Lantolq got the feeling that it wouldn't be a good place to take small children anyway.

"I want to see it too! When I came here before, Willem didn't let me!" Tiat exclaimed, taking advantage of the situation.

Lantolq lightly plopped her fist down on Tiat's head. "I told you, didn't I? No looking around or detours. Let's hurry on."

Lakish and Tiat both slumped in despair.

Thirty minutes later.

The situation took a turn for the worse. Wiping away the cold sweat inside her mind, Lantolq looked around. To the right, various people and clanky horse carriages went back and forth along a wide avenue lined with stone buildings. To the left, a vast, well tended garden spread out behind an endless black iron fence. Still not quite spring yet, only a light green covered it. In less than a month, the whole place would surely bloom with vivid colors. Not being able to see that felt a little unfortunate, but now was not the time to be thinking about that.

Needless to say, both sights were unknown to Lantolq. Also — the real problem at hand — she couldn't spot anyone she came with: Naigrat, Aiseia, Tiat, or Lakish.

"Well this is bad," she muttered, closing her eyes and pressing her forehead.

She thought back on the events leading up to this. It was simple: while walking through the city, a building visible in the distance suddenly captured her gaze. It was the spire of a famous church she once read about in a book, one of the large structures built by a genius architect three hundred years in the past, of which only seven existed in all of Regul Aire. It was written that their unique silhouettes grasp the hearts of any who look, even from afar. Now Lantolq knew that the book was right. After spotting it, she got drawn in just a tiny bit (or at least that's what she told herself), and, the next thing she knew, she had gotten separated from her friends.

What an embarrassment, ending up like this right after I warned the younger ones to not go off looking at things and get lost. Lantolq never would have thought she'd mess up this big. Their destination was the treatment facility here in Collinadiluche, the place where she once went when she became fully grown. Her memories were a bit fuzzy, but she could probably remember the way. Worst case scenario, she could just take to the skies and check the directions

from above. She wanted to avoid drawing attention, but it would be better than extremely delaying their reunion.

“I guess I’ll just walk though.”

Fortunately, Collinadiluche being a trade city with ties to many other islands, markless like the fairies walking down the streets weren’t unusual. As long as she didn’t do anything particularly unusual, she wouldn’t stand out. Just simply strolling along, she could blend in with the town scenery. Thinking about it that way, she was able to forget her situation and lighten her footsteps a little.

Seven minutes later.

“… ahh.”

Once again, Lantolq really felt just how terrifying of a city Collinadiluche was. After every few minutes of walking, she came across something intriguing. Whether it be a famous building, a curious little alley, or a seemingly random bronze statue right in the middle of the road, she never ceased to be amazed at the city’s abundant repertoire. Being by herself, she couldn’t help but stop every time she saw something.

This is no good. If she didn’t try a little more seriously to advance, the sun would set on her. With that sense of urgency pushing her back, Lantolq jogged down a wide avenue, turned a corner, and…

“… ahh.”

… found another magnificent building. The Central Collinadiluche Grand Library. Not only was it one of the oldest structures still standing in the city, it also boasted the largest collection of books in the entirety of Regul Aire. That graceful white tower, still reaching high after crossing over centuries of history. Despite her supposed focus, Lantolq completely fell prisoner to that sight the moment she saw it. However, her legs, spurred on by her sense of urgency, continued to move. As a result…

“Ah!”

“Hmph.”

She bumped into something that felt like a wall and bounced off, landing bottom down on the ground.

“Ow…”

“Oh, my bad. I was a little distracted.”

“Ah, no, I wasn’t watching where I was going…” she responded.

Apparently, the thing Lantolq bumped into wasn’t a wall, but a markless old man with blonde hair, blonde facial hair, and a sturdy physique like a boulder. Due to the bright pure white mantle he wore, he stood out, and not in a good way. He seemed to conspicuously float above the scenery of Collinadiluche, the city which accepted any and all races. Still, after seeing him with her own eyes, Lantolq thought for a moment that maybe the thing she bumped into really was a wall after all. She didn’t know why, but that kind of heavy and mysterious force exuded from the old man.

“Are you injured?”

Even in his words of concern, a sort of overwhelming pressure filled his voice. *I guess in such a big and historic city, you get strange people like this walking the streets like normal*, Lantolq thought.

“Ah… I’m fine, thank you.”

Timidly, she grabbed the hand held out to her and stood up. A gentle smile showed on the man’s face, but it failed to conceal the sharp, piercing gaze of his eyes. Even being a seasoned soldier, Lantolq felt like her legs would buckle in if she didn’t consciously keep her mind focused.

“Ah… by the way, young lady. This exchange of words must be some kind of fate. Will you help me a little with directions?”

A brief silence.

“Huh?”

“Well, it’s a little embarrassing, but, truth is, I’m a bit lost,” the man said as he scratched his cheek. The gesture didn’t fit him. “I thought about asking someone on the road, but… well, talking to strangers passing by isn’t my forte.”

“Ah…”

That makes sense, Lantolq thought. Just standing there, his enormous sense of presence seemed to overwhelm his surroundings. She figured that would be just a little unfitting for casually asking someone for directions.

“I don’t mind, but I’m not from around here, so I can’t say I’m familiar with the roads. I don’t know whether I’ll be of any help to you.” Lantolq left out the bit about her being a little lost herself. “Well, where are you heading to?”

“A restaurant. I hear it’s near the general treatment facility.”

What a coincidence, Lantolq thought. “I have business there as well. If you’d like, we can go together.”

“Oh, that would be great.”

The old man smiled. Or at least, wrinkles appeared in his aged, ancient tree like face and formed the shape of a smile. The smile had such force behind it that it would probably make a small child cry. *Good thing I’m an adult*, Lantolq thought, slightly raising the ends of her lips.

“I’ve come to this city before, so I declined an offer for directions, saying I already knew the way,” the old man said as they walked.

Following alongside him, Lantolq felt a little like a servant taking care of her master. “Oh,” she responded half heartedly.

“But when I actually started walking, I realized the roads have completely changed.”

“Ah…”

That can't be right. Collinadiluche was a historical city. Maybe various definitions of 'historical city' existed, but one of them had to be that many ancient buildings still stood within the city. So naturally, the roads couldn't have just completely changed. As far as Lantolq knew, the area around the Grand Library hadn't received any major renovations in the past hundred and some years. *Well, he is a bit old. It wouldn't be surprising if his memory's started to get a little off*. Rude thoughts passed through her head.

"Since this is such a rare opportunity, I thought it would be nice to enjoy a bit of sightseeing while I'm here, but I wouldn't want to keep the person I'm meeting waiting forever."

"Ah…" An invisible thorn pierced Lantolq's chest.

"Still, it would be regrettable to only walk through this city. I guess I'll have to come back as a tourist one day."

"Is your usual residence on a faraway island?" Lantolq asked.

"Hm, it certainly is far away, but more troublesome than the distance is–" Suddenly, the old man looked up.

Lantolq followed his gaze. "Ah."

Across the street stood Naigrat. She rose about a head taller than the pedestrians passing by, making her extremely easy to spot. Noticing Lantolq, she started crossing the avenue.

"Finally found you! We were worried about you!"

"I'm sorry." Lantolq, having no excuses, sincerely apologized.

"I was wondering what to do if you bumped into a carriage or something, you know? You guys are strong when you fight, but in regular times you aren't that sturdy."

"Well… ah…"

About half of the Leprechauns' strength during battle stemmed from their ignited Venom, and almost all of the other half came from the Dug Weapons they wielded. In other words, in everyday times, they

had almost none of the power they had on the battlefield. In addition, most living beings, not only Leprechauns, probably wouldn't be fine after bumping into a carriage. Well, of course, Naigrat didn't belong in 'most living beings'.

"Even if you're going to become ground meat, you'd taste better if you went through an actual machine specialized to ground meat."

"Um… what?"

Lantolq started to lose track of what Naigrat was saying. Anyway, it seemed apparent that Naigrat had been worried for her… probably. She already properly apologized, and now she needed to reflect on her behavior.

"Ah, sorry to interrupt your conversation, young lady." The old man joined in. "Please don't scold the child too much. I was a tourist passing by, and I was lost. She had the kind heart to show me the way."

"Eh?" *What's this grandpa talking about all of a sudden?*

"If this has inconvenienced you in any way, allow me to make up for it. Despite how I may look, I do have a little authority. So please, don't be too hard on your little sister."

"Oh my." Naigrat looked a little bewildered. "Is that what happened?"

"Uh… well, sure?" Lantolq answered hesitantly. Yes, they did walk together under the pretense that she was showing the old man the way. However, just before that, she had been the lost one, and that was completely her own fault with no room for excuses. Also, she and Naigrat weren't sisters…

"Well, alright." Naigrat sighed with a slight tinge of pride. "No one else knows, and it didn't cause any problems. I also don't want to tell you to not be nice to other people. But next time, tell me, okay?"

"Ah… okay, understood." Lantolq, going along with the flow, nodded.

“You too, mister.”

“Hm?”

“I’m sure you were anxious, being lost while sightseeing, but it’s not good to chat with a random young lady and walk around with her. People might think you’re kidnapping her, you know?”

“Ah… o-oh, yeah. I guess you’re right.”

“Tourist kidnappings aren’t a rare occurrence in Collinadiluche. If you need directions, you can ask the golems set up by the tourist department, okay?” Naigrat spoke in a gentle yet stern voice, as if scolding a child for a prank.

After a moment of silence, the old man, looking utterly bewildered, suddenly burst out in explosive laughter. Every single person walking along the street turned around, the pigeons resting on top of the lamps flew away, and a horse pulling a carriage off in the distance started flailing about.

“… are you okay?” Lantolq asked.

“Yes, my apologies.” The old man suppressed his laughter and wiped the tears from his eyes. “There hasn’t been anyone who took that attitude towards me in a very long time. It also feels refreshing and nostalgic to see a young lady not be intimidated before me. It made me feel young again.”

“Uh.” Certainly, he had a scary face, a scary physique, and a scary mysterious air about him, but Lantolq couldn’t imagine everyone he talked to being afraid of him.

“Well, from here, I can find the way myself. I don’t want to steal anymore of your time, so I think it’s time for me to get going.”

“… are you sure you’re okay?”

“Don’t worry, next time I get lost I can just ask one of those golems, right?” the old man said with a wink, and a rather skilled wink at that. “Thank you for the fun conversation.”

As they watched the old man walk off, Lantolq and Naigrat tilted their heads in confusion.

“I feel like I’ve seen him before… recently,” Naigrat murmured.

Now that she mentioned it, Lantolq become aware of the strange feeling that had been wriggling inside her mind. “But if I met him before… I feel like I wouldn’t be able to forget someone with such a strong impression.”

“Hmm, if we both remember seeing him, then that means… on the 68th Island? But that can’t be…”

Failing to come up with an answer, they continued to tilt their heads. Nearby, next to the street which they passed through, in the wide Falsta Square, stood the stone statue of the Great Sage, the most prominent figure in all of Regul Aire.

“Okay then, the girl who had the dream, come this way.”

“Y-Yes! Comingdsgsf!”

Lakish, lead by a group of nurses in white gowns, headed off to become a fully grown fairy soldier, wincing at the pain from energetically biting down on her tongue.

“I doubt she’s very far,” Naigrat said with a troubled face, then went out to search for Lantolq. “If something happened to her, I’m going to have to give her a big hug as punishment for making me worry,” she joked.

By the way, it is said that Naigrat’s full strength hugs could shatter boulders.

Now that leaves two more. They were sitting in a plain waiting room inside the treatment facility, having been told to standby until the next instructions. However, they received no comment on just when those next instructions would come.

“Wonder where Lan went,” Aiseia mumbled, a bored look on her face.

“She definitely went to see the Grave of the Perjurer!” Tiat answered as she hopped up and down next to the wall, trying to view the scenery out of the slightly highly placed window. “We passed closeby, and it’s a popular spot you definitely can’t miss when you go to Collinadiluche. No fair!”

“Lan’s not like you when it comes to those things, ya know?”

“Rust Nose said that beauty seduces the heart!”

“You sure he said that in the context that we’re talking about?” Aiseia titled her head. “Anyways, this sure is boring. Should we play a game or something?”

“Not boring! I’m very busy right now!”

“I see.” Aiseia flung her head down on the desk in front of her and watched Tiat’s back jump up and down. Of course, Tiat could’ve just ignited Venom and flew up, but she didn’t seem to notice, and Aiseia didn’t feel like pointing it out.

“Ahh, just a little more, legs! All that physical training was for this moment!”

“What a carefree kid…”

Looking up at the window in question from her position, Aiseia only saw the blue sky spreading out on the other side, the same, old sky that stared back at her with the same face whether she looked on the 68th or the 11th Island. Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Maybe these are the next instructions.” Aiseia looked up, and the door opened.

“Excuse me…” With a hesitant voice, in came not Naigrat, nor a doctor, nor a soldier, but a young Lucantrobos lady with soft looking fur.

“Hm? You’re…”

“Firu!? Long time no see!” Apparently, Tiat recalled the newcomer’s name before Aiseia.

Firacolulivia Dorio, the mayor’s daughter. A few months earlier, Aiseia and Tiat went sightseeing around town under her guidance — or more accurately, under Willem’s scheming. To the Leprechauns, who usually had almost nothing to do with anything outside the 68th Floating Island, it was an unforgettable, peculiar experience.

“Aiseia… Tiat…” For some reason, Firu’s face stiffened up as she murmured their names and looked around the room. “They’re not here. Kutori and Nephren.”

“Firu?”

“My apologies.” After entering the room and closing the door behind her, Firu slumped down to the floor. “I didn’t know. What you girls were. Whose sacrifices were maintaining the everyday life we took for granted.”

“Huh?” Tiat’s eyes opened wide.

“Ah — I see.” Aiseia, understanding the meaning of that sudden apology, scratched the back of her head. “You heard from someone, huh? About us.”

“Yes. I happened to overhear uncle and father talking.”

The ‘uncle’ she spoke of referred to First Officer Limeskin, who she had been close with from a young age, and the ‘father’ referred to Gilandalus Dorio, the mayor of Collinadiluche. Aiseia didn’t know how Leprechauns popped up in a conversation between those two, but, for the time being, it seemed apparent that Firu knew about their nature as secret weapons.

“While you all were risking your lives on the battlefield, I was struggling to decide which jam to put on my scone for lunch. I spent everyday like that, without knowing the truth or shame. Now, I feel so embarrassed…” she confessed, her head faced down,

sounding almost on the verge of tears.

“Uh, umm…” Tiat fumbled for words.

“Ah, well, I’m thankful for the fresh response, but… Firu,” Aiseia began.

“Yes?”

“We don’t need to talk about how we’re disposable weapons and all. You have a strong conscience, you were raised in a higher class environment, and you’re the type to believe that there are more good than bad people in the world. I’m not going to try to tell someone like you to agree with what we do.

So I want you to think about it this way. We secretly put our lives on the line so that all normal people on every floating island can go on living their everyday lives in ignorance.”

“Everyday life… ignorance…”

“That’s right. So don’t be embarrassed that you didn’t know about us. That time you spent in ignorance is exactly what we fight for… it’s like, our pride, or something like that.”

“Oohh…” Tiat seemed to be impressed. It remained doubtful whether or not she was aware that Aiseia was talking about her too.

“Look up, Firu. At the very least, we didn’t risk our lives all this time to see our friend cry.”

“Ai… seia…”

Just then, the door opened again. This time, a blue haired fairy, Lantolq, showed up.

“Sorry for making you wor–” Lantolq’s apology stopped short. She looked around the room: Aiseia with her elbows propped up on a desk, Tiat pressed up against the wall with only her head turned around towards the door, and an unfamiliar Lucantrobos slumped down on the floor. “– What’s happening here?”

“That’s a rather difficult question…” Aiseia said with a concerned face, then laughed. “Wait. Lan, you’re alone? I thought Naigrat went to get you.”

“Yes, she was right there when a messenger from First Officer Limeskin grabbed her,” Lantolq said, pointing towards the entrance of the treatment facility. “They went out again. I was told to wait here with you guys.”

“Went out? Where?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we need to worry.”

“Well, that’s true.”

Aiseia and Lantolq both nodded.

“… um?” Firu, not able to keep up with their conversation, tilted her head in confusion, her eyes still teary.

“So what did you see? The Grave of the Perjurer!? Or a bit further to the Barley Market!?” Tiat, meanwhile, was being her usual self.

“This way, Miss Naigrat.”

“What?”
“First Officer Limeskin awaits you.”

A rather small Reptrace showed her to a door… or maybe he was actually average, as the individual heights of the Reptrace varied drastically due to their varying growth periods, but Naigrat, used to seeing Limeskin’s giant figure, couldn’t help but think that.

“You know I just got here, I could really use some rest…”

The messenger didn’t respond. He seemed very army-like, not saying anything unnecessary.

“Everyone is already waiting.”

“Who do you mean by everyone…”

No response. Well, Naigrat saw that coming.

Lead on by the messenger, Naigrat went out the back entrance of the treatment facility and into a small, dark alley filled with the stench of detergent and drainage. Looking up, she noticed ropes strung across the street from window to opposing window with abundant laundry hanging down from them.

— *I wonder where we're going*, she thought. Judging by the atmosphere of silence the messenger seemed to give off, Naigrat didn't think she would get an answer if she asked. *Since I was called alone, it's probably something no good that he doesn't want the kids to hear.* Thinking that, her mood sunk a little.

Just then, the delicious smell of charred meat wafted by her nose. Looking up, she spotted a small sign indicating the back entrance to a restaurant. *Oh yeah, what am I going to do for dinner?* As she pondered, the messenger opened the small door and entered the restaurant.

"Here?" she asked, but, as expected, received no response. The Reptrace simply turned around briefly, gestured for her to follow, then continued down the narrow hallway. Stepping inside, Naigrat caught a glimpse of the posh interior. "Oh no, I wonder if my clothes aren't fit for the dress code."

She looked down at herself. Now, she was wearing cute clothes, by her standards, but, still, it was a casual outfit. Also, after having been shook about by an airship for an entire day, she couldn't exactly say that her appearance was very refined. Despite her worries, the Reptrace's back steadily moved further and further away. *He could talk with me at least a little bit*, she complained inside her head as she went to catch up.

They stopped in front of a heavy looking door. The messenger's claw bearing hand knocked twice in quick succession, followed by a third knock after a short pause.

"Enter," a low voice said from within.

Oh my, a secret knock, Naigrat thought as the door opened. A large table sat in the center of the room, unfortunately without any food on it. Around the table sat some familiar and some not so familiar faces.

"… eh?"

Against the wall stood Limeskin in his army uniform. Well, he was the one who summoned Naigrat, so no surprise there. Next to him stood a Haresantrobos soldier. The insignia on his shoulder showed a shield and a scythe, which signified the Military Police, if Naigrat remembered correctly.

A middle aged Lucantrobos man sat at the table. The first new face. He wore a suit which looked to be of high quality and a fashionable monocle. His gentleman-like appearance fit the fancy restaurant more than Naigrat's at least. Next, for some reason, there was the old man in a white mantle which she just parted with earlier. Judging by his surprised looking face, he probably didn't expect their meeting either.

There was one last person at the table, a person with a very special face, so special that the faces of all the others present seemed to completely fly out of Naigrat's mind. A young girl with gray hair. Her left eye was closed tightly shut for some reason, but there was no question about it: she was the fairy soldier supposedly lost in battle upon the land.

"Neph… ren?"

"Nn." Nephren tilted her head.

"Are you… real?"

"About half."

Naigrat received a rather puzzling answer, but she could barely hear it anyway. She wanted to run up to her. Hug her. Rub her cheeks against hers. Cry and wail. Those impulses shot up to her head, swelled up, and burst. Naigrat collapsed down to the carpet.

“S… Sorry for causing such an embarrassing scene…”

Naigrat took a seat as suggested, then grabbed Nephren and made her sit on her knees against her will. The amused looks from the guys around the table were a little rough, but she had no intentions of letting go.

“I think you’re still causing an embarrassing scene,” Nephren said.

“Quiet.” Naigrat also had no intentions of listening to complaints.

“… well then, let me introduce myself.” The Lucantrobos man, still seated, nodded slightly. “My name is Gilandalus Dorio. I am mayor of this city, elected by its citizens.”

“Eh.” Naigrat froze. “Ah, um, I’m Naigrat, from the Orlandri Trading Company.”

“Nice to meet you, Naigrat. Over here we have–”

“Coincidences are frightening things. We just met earlier, young lady,” the old man in the white mantle said with a wink, cutting off Mr. Dorio. “My apologies for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Suwon. I’m something like an advisor for the Winged Guard.”

“Ah… nice to meet you again.” The mayor and a retired old man from the army. Why were these kind of people meeting in secret, and, moreover, why was she called to that secret meeting? Naigrat didn’t understand. “Um, so… I have no idea what this is about… what is going on? Why is Nephren here? Could it be that–” *Willem is also safe?* She started to ask, but shut her mouth. “– another person was also saved from the ground?”

The atmosphere around the table seemed to grow slightly heavier. No one spoke. Perhaps she shouldn’t have asked.

“May I explain the situation?” The Haresantrobos soldier took a step forward as he readjusted his glasses.

“I’ll leave it to you.” The old man in the white mantle nodded.

“First Officer Baroni Makish. Pleased to meet you,” the Haresantrobos said after a light bow.

“Ah, nice to meet you…” *First officer… which means he’s as important as Limeskin?*

“First, let’s clear up one misunderstanding. The thing you are you holding on your knees is not the fairy that you know. It is something else, something whose body and mind have been transformed after being polluted by a Beast on the land.”

“Uh…” More rather puzzling words. Naigrat tried giving Nephren’s cheek a poke with her fingertip. Soft flesh. The type of softness that made her want to boil and eat it right away. That texture which Naigrat knew very well hadn’t changed one bit. *What did he say? Polluted by a Beast?*

“Next… I think you’re already aware that there are currently no predicted Teimerre attacks…”

Of course she knew. Naigrat nodded.

“We have identified the cause for this. Kutori Nota Seniolis.”

Eh?

“In the first place, in order for a Teimerre to attack us up in the sky, it needs to have a large enough body, then split that body and have the fragments ride on the wind until they happen to land on a floating island. In other words, a large enough number of them must gather to do anything.

Kutori Nota Seniolis destroyed an incredible number of Teimerre during the battle at the K96-MAL Ruins. Furthermore, ones that were previously sleeping underground came up to the surface and met annihilation.”

“Kutori…?”

“The number of Teimerre on the ground is currently drastically decreased. Although they may not be extinct, they will likely need a sizable period of time before they are able to attack the sky again,”

the Haresantrobos continued.

“The girl threw away her life… no, used her life until the very end to protect Regul Aire.” Limeskin said, but the words failed to sink in.

Sacrifice oneself to save an island. That was the original duty of the fairies. Kutori fought and returned home alive because she wanted to be freed from that, but, in the end, she fulfilled it anyway.

“… she really was clumsy.”

Naigrat didn’t want to call her death fate. Kutori fought by her own will until her last breath for her loved ones, or maybe just loved one. Regul Aire just happened to be helped as a result. She preferred to think about it like that.

Or maybe the ‘Braves’ that Willem talked about once were like that too. They fought only for themselves, but their struggle became twisted by words like fate or duty into a fight for the world.

There were no more battles to fight. Danger had left. The situation should’ve made Naigrat happy. She should’ve been proud. Yet, for some reason, she felt just a little frustrated.

“This information is known not only by the Winged Guard, but also by various organizations throughout Regul Aire with some skill at gathering intelligence. Upon finding out, they all agreed on one point: now is the time for Regul Aire as a whole to rethink its strategy against the Beasts,” the Harensantrobos explained.

“And that’s why they tried to lay a hand on our… Dug Weapon users, huh,” Naigrat said.

Limeskin’s eyes seemed to be saying ‘you’re the one that’s laying a hand on them’. Nephren looked at Naigrat with a face that asked ‘what do you mean?’ *A lot happened, but anyways I drove the bad guys off so it’s okay*. Of course, she couldn’t say that out loud, so instead she just made a fist. Maybe that would get the message across.

“Also, one more thing,” the Haresantrobos said.

"… what?"

"What they're demanding of the Winged Guard is the release of the authority to fight against the 17 Beasts. Specifically, the rights to develop weapons, maintain them, and use them in times of need. The Dug Weapons are no more than one part of this."

It took a bit for Naigrat to understand. "The Beasts are powerful and mysterious enemies. To ask for permission to develop and maintain the firepower to fight against them means…" She gulped. "… the same thing as asking for permission to expand their military without limit."

"That's right. If they can't judge how much strength is necessary to fight the Beast, it allows them to say that any and all power 'may be necessary'. Ethics and the Constitution of Regul Aire will be nothing in the face of such an excuse."

A wide variety of races lived in Regul Aire, even some which were originally in predator-prey relationships. Over the centuries, everyone gradually learned to get along peacefully, but that didn't change the fact that they all still held different values.

Naturally, conflicts, big and small, never completely stopped. A large war involving many floating islands threatened to occur more than just once or twice. The Constitution of Regul Aire existed for the purpose of stopping such conflicts. Written by the legendary Great Sage back in Regul Aire's early years, it served as the highest law, applying equally to every race and place. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not carry unnecessary arms. All who broke rules such as those received proper judgement by the local governments of the various islands, or by the Winged Guard when that was not possible.

"Our real subject is from here on," the Haresantrobos said.

"… there's still more?"
"They are requesting the authority to use anti-Beast weapons whenever they deem them to be necessary. What does this mean?" He looked at Naigrat, as if waiting for an answer.

Naigrat didn't know. She wasn't a soldier, just an employee at a trading company. Although she wasn't completely ignorant of those kinds of tactics, she couldn't say she was knowledgeable.

"In any place where a Beast appears, they can fight with as much firepower as they want," Nephren said softly.

"Exactly." The Haresantrobos nodded.

"… why does that matter? No Beast besides the Teimerre can fly, so it doesn't matter now, right?" Naigrat asked.

"Yes, at first glance. But, if a Beast were to appear on a floating island, they would be able to fight as they please," Nephren responded.

"But that shouldn't be possible…"

"Excuse me. Allow me to join in the explanation from here." Mayor Dorio, who had been silently watching over their conversation up until then, interrupted, his pointy Lucantrobos ears wagging back and forth. After glancing at all the important people lined up in the room, he began. "This happened about half a month ago. An airship fell on this island. It was registered in the documents as a civilian salvager ship, but we now know that was simply a disguise. The ship's true name was 'Tomorrow Grasper Number 7', a ground expedition ship unofficially held by the Elpis National Defense Air Force."

"The ship was in pieces after the fall, but the storage rooms were particularly sturdily constructed and kept intact in their original forms," the old man with the white mantle, Suwon, added. "Inside were traces of rather high grade barrier techniques."

What are these people talking about? Naigrat didn't understand. She didn't want to either. Unfortunately, she understood enough of the conversation to think that. "Barrier techniques…?"

"Good enough to gain my approval. And good enough to restrain even a Beast…" Suwon said.

"… um." Naigrat didn't know what the old man's approval was

supposed to imply, but she figured only one conclusion could follow from their explanations. It seemed so unrealistic that she couldn't believe it herself. "Are you saying… Elpis brought a Beast into Regul Aire?"

Naigrat wished everyone would break out in laughter at her ridiculous question. However, not a single person did. She felt Nephren budge slightly on top of her knees.

"Of course, it is no more than a possibility. There is no concrete evidence. There are no traces of a Beast escaping from the fallen ship, and there have been no reports of attacks. That's why we ended up calling the fairy soldiers here in the way that we did," Limeskin said.

"There are reports that many Elpis soldiers have infiltrated the island. There is no mistake that they are trying to make something happen soon," the Haresantrobos added on.

"… but… why? Why do such a stupid…"

"No matter how irregular the behavior may seem to us, they have carried it out, and we must respond. Please, stay in this city for a bit and prepare for the worst." Mayor Dorio bowed.

Naigrat glanced at the soldiers, who nodded silently. The Winged Guard currently did not have the means to formally request the fairies to be stationed in Collinadiluche. They needed Naigrat to pretend she brought them all on her own accord.

"… understood." Feeling something bitter in her throat, Naigrat nodded. After hearing all that, there was no way she could shake her head. "But, hm, allow me to add one condition."

"Certainly. If it is something we are capable of," the mayor answered immediately.

Part of Naigrat didn't feel right about utilizing her position, but she also didn't want to waste the opportunity. She would do anything to help those kids, even become a demon. Well, she was a demon anyway, but… making up her mind, Naigrat spoke.

“Can you give the children permission to have free time?”

Part 5: The Man Named Willem

The scarlet setting sun shining through the lace curtains lightly illuminated the cramped room. Inside was only a young couple.

“Ah… ah…” On top of the disarrayed sheets, a young Turturel woman breathed rapidly. “That felt… really good…” Lightly patting her flushed cheeks, she sat up and readjusted her disheveled clothes. “Wherever your fingers touch heats up like a fire’s lit. It’s like I lose control of my body.”

“Good to hear.” Sitting on the edge of that bed, Willem looked away in the opposite direction.

He still couldn’t remember much about himself, but, at the very least, it was clear that he was a young, healthy man. As for the Turturel, excluding the powerful light gray wings on her back, her outward appearance closely resembled that of a markless. Her skin was soft, warm, and smooth to the touch, and when she let out weird noises, well, he couldn’t stop his thoughts from going off into weird directions.

“Your muscles were tightened up in strange ways in a few places, so I loosened them all.” He took a deep breath, desperately trying to calm his excited heart to hide his body’s response. “If you don’t put excess strain on your body for a bit, the inflammation won’t get worse. You should take a hot bath and sleep early today.”

“What’s wrong? You seem so distant now that it’s over.”

“Nothing.”

‘Liar. Your ears are bright red.”

“If you’ve noticed then don’t say anything!” Willem shot back, still facing away. In the heat of the moment, the patch covering his right eye shifted slightly out of position. He fixed it in a hurry. Still not used to wearing it, the feeling of the patch being there still hadn’t fully sunken into his body.

“Ah, sorry. I feel like I might’ve let out those kinds of noises while

you were doing your thing. Was it too stimulating?"

"No. I'm not a kid. I don't react to everything like that."

"Adults react to stuff like that, not kids, you know?"

"I don't need you correcting me!" he grumbled again, still facing away.

"Haha, how cute," the woman said with a childlike laugh. "Willem, was it? You seem to be acting all grown up and all, but you're pretty young, right? How old are you?"
"I don't remember." He told the truth.

"You just started working at Astaltus' inn recently, right? What were you doing before? Studying medicine in Collinadiluche or something?"

"Like I said, I don't remember." Again, the truth.

According to what Willem had heard, Collinadiluche was a large city a little ways away which boasted a large population and the longest history on Regul Aire. Of course, many well known medical academies were located there. Naturally, there were probably many who studied medicine in those schools. However, he somehow got the feeling that he wasn't one of them. Whatever he studied, it most likely wasn't medicine or anything like that. He didn't study pleasant massage theory, but something else, something more covered in blood and dirt. He couldn't explain the feeling very well.

"Ahh, my body's so light! I think I'll be able to fly around tomorrow!" The woman stood up and stretched.

"You were pretty stiff. Is your work that exhausting?"

"I deliver for the post office. Some days I carry pretty heavy things. Really unfortunate that I have to gain this muscle…" she said as she rotated her shoulder around.

"Don't strain yourself. What I did is no more than emergency treatment. One wrong move and you could end up falling again tomorrow."

“That wouldn’t be nice… wait, you’re going home already?”

“Yeah.”

“Why such a hurry? How about a cup of tea at least.”

“No thanks. Someone’s waiting for me.”

“… ah, the little kid from earlier?” the Turturel woman giggled. “I’m disappointed that I failed to entice you, but I guess we can’t leave that girl all alone. How unfortunate.”

“Glad to see you understand. Well then, I’m off.”

“Okaay. Say hi to Astaltus and your little companion for me.”

Who am I? The young man thought. His name was Willem, apparently. He only knew because others told him. He couldn’t actually remember his name, or anything else about himself.

Every time he tried to remember his past, searing pain tore through his head. Whenever he tried to endure that pain, for some reason, Elq, another survivor of the same airship crash, seemed to get pain of her own. As a result, he didn’t want to test that any further.

What’s gone is gone. I need to focus on what’s in front of me, not get lost in the past and lose sight of the present. With that, the young man set out to live a new life.

Stars filled the cloudless sky to the brim, looking as if they would spill down at any moment. The clear, chilly air felt refreshing on the young man’s skin, heated from a day’s hard work.

“Ah… I’m exhausted.”

He was an employee at an inn, so, of course, his traveling massage gigs weren’t exactly part of his work. Despite his head not being able to recall a thing, his fingers seemed to remember a lot. At first, it just started as an additional service to the inn’s regular customers, but, somehow, word started to go around, and now people from all

over were calling for him directly.

Almost all of his customers were middle aged beast men. Because of their large amount of innate muscle, decay from age or lack of exercise affected them particularly hard. They also tended to think of themselves as still young, which led them to overestimate the amount of strain their muscles could handle. However, once in a while, like today, he got calls from young women.

"… Willem, too promiscuous." And every such occasion put Elq into a grumpy mood on the way home. "You get so weak against any slightly pretty adult."

"No I don't," he groaned back.

"Cheater."

"Am not. I can't even cheat because I'm not in a relationship… oh, wait."

Thinking about it, he realized that, with his memories gone, he had no idea about his past self's relationships with women. It was certainly possible that he had a girlfriend, or even a wife.

… *nah.* He quickly dismissed the idea. He just couldn't imagine himself whispering words of love to a girl, so it was hard to think that he'd ever enter a special relationship with one. Surely, he had been single and didn't deserve any accusations of cheating.

"Ah!"

Elq tripped on a stone, probably as a result of her looking up at the stars while walking down a dark road at night. Just as she was about to fall forward, he grabbed her by the back of her neck.

"Be careful. The road here is a bit bumpy."

"O-Okay…"

"Should we hold hands?"

"Eh? Uh… but…"

She seemed hesitant, but, not minding, he grabbed her hand anyway. Cold. Then, he noticed: their heights were too far apart to walk like this.

“L-Let go, it’s embarrassing,” Elq protested.

“Why’d you turn into a teenage girl all of a sudden.”

“I told you, I’m not a kidafgh!?”

They couldn’t walk while holding their hands, but Elq couldn’t walk safely by herself. It was a tricky problem indeed, but a solution existed. He lifted up the girl’s small body entirely off the ground and placed her on his shoulders. A piggyback ride.

“Whoa…”

“Be careful, it’ll be more than just painful if you fall.”

“Wow, I’m so high up! I can see so much!” She didn’t seem to be listening. “The stars! It’s like I can reach them!”

Elq stretched out her hand to the sky with all her might. Of course, there was no way she would ever reach the stars. But still, she got the feeling that she could. So she kept stretching, and stretching. He understood that feeling very well. He didn’t know why, but he did.

“Hold onto something, okay? Hair or whatever, doesn’t matter.”

“I-I know!”

Despite receiving perhaps the most childlike treatment possible, Elq didn’t seem to complain.

“Hey, Elq. You knew me before I lost my memory, right?”

He felt the presence on his shoulders shake. “… I don’t know.”

“Really? But…” She seemed rather knowledgeable about Willem. He first heard the name ‘Willem’ when she called him by it. Also… “You seem to be really comfortable around me, if we were total strangers before. Well, that’s been a big help, but…”

“That’s, um… just how things turned out, yeah.” Elq’s answer seemed rather uncertain. It was obvious that she was hiding something. Well, Willem figured he didn’t need to pursue. “Carma went off somewhere, and, well, I’m an adult, but it’s my first time living my own life, so I didn’t want to be alone.”

“Carma?”

“She took care of me ever since I was born. Along with Ebo and Jay.”

“Hmm?”

A bunch of names came out of her mouth. Willem figured they were her family’s servants or something. In that case, she must have been from a fairly prominent family. *Is it okay for her to be leisurely spending her days out with me? I wonder if her household is in a big panic right now…*

“Is it okay for you to not go back home?”

“Yeah. I don’t have one anymore,” Elq responded casually. “If I wait, I’m sure Carma will eventually find me. When that happens, we’ll look for Ebo together.”

“Hm.” *Looking around for her scattered old servants, huh? I don’t really get it, but I hope it goes well.*

“So that’s why being with you right now is just how things turned out. I’m sure it’ll end soon. It’s just a… c-casual relationship?”

Elq seemed to be using words without really knowing their meaning. “Using more adult words I see.”

“I know, right?” Willem heard a proud *hmph* from above. “– Also, just a little addition to our conversation from before.”

“Hm?”

“Kutori is me. But I am not Kutori.”

— *Eh?*

“Kuto… ri?”

An unfamiliar name. A name he didn’t remember. A name that tugged at his heartstrings.

“So that’s why I’m not going to fall for you. I feel like that would be really unfair — Willem?” Noticing his odd behavior, Elq grabbed his hair. “What’s wrong? Not feeling well?”

“… I’m fine,” he responded, forcing the surging impulse to puke back down inside him. “It’s nothing. Just lost balance a little. Guess I haven’t been exercising enough.”

“Really?”

“Really.” His body seemed to be used to acting strong in front of children. Apparently, it was good at telling lies as well. Still suppressing a headache and nausea, Willem managed a natural smile. “Alright, let’s run the rest of the way home. Running is the best for fixing a lack of exercise.”

“Eh? W-Wait, then I’ll get off.”

“I won’t let you down! Grab on so you don’t fall off!”

“Eh? Eh, eh, eh?”

Willem ignored the voices of confusion for the time being, then, as he promised, broke out running down the night road.

“Ah, ah, ahhh!!”

As expected, on top of his shoulders, Elq violently rocked about. Her small hands held on to Willem’s black hair for dear life. It hurt just a little. But, he welcomed that kind of pain. It warmed his heart, unlike some random headache.

“No talking, you’ll bite your tongue–”

“L-Let me down! Aaaahhh!”

Guess it’s no use. “… hey, Elq.”

“W-WhahaT?!”

“I love you.”

“…….” A long silence. “You’re treating me like a child again,” Elq complained.

“Haha, how’d you know.”

He felt a strong embrace around the back of his head.

“There’s no way you would say that seriously. I know because Kutori, and maybe Leila too, suffered from that.”

A sharp pain struck his head again. And this time, his chest too, for some reason.

Elq Harksten was dead, apparently. She was originally an undying being, but a label saying ‘this is a corpse’ had been pasted onto her. Both the world and the Visitor’s body itself believed the label. The world treated her as a corpse, and her body acted as if it were one. And if everyone thinks something is a corpse… then it’s a corpse. In that way, the label overwrote reality.

However, just a few days earlier, Nils made a small wound in that label, causing it to lose a small amount of persuasiveness. Then, that in turn caused the corpse to become not a corpse just a little. Elq transformed from a complete corpse to a confusing thing with just a tiny bit of undying flesh mixed in.

Willem didn’t really understand the logic, and he probably didn’t need to either. What’s important was that the girl’s current body was unmistakably almost a corpse. On top of that, though, even if it was just a tiny bit, she was living. She was enjoying each day to its fullest, acting all grown up yet still behaving like a child at the same time.

And lastly, unlike him, who had lost his past, she had somewhere to go. She had someone to meet. Things she needed to do. Yet she was hiding all those things and staying at the inn with him. He knew the reason: she was worried that she couldn’t leave him alone in his

current state.

Inside the pot, boar meat boiled noisily. Enticed by the delicious smell, his hands threatened to lash out on their own, but a look from Astaltus stopped them. Willem knew very well that if one wants to eat the most delicious meat, one must not go against a Troll's directions. As always, though, he had no idea why he knew that very well. *My past sure is mysterious*, he thought casually.

Astaltus, the owner of the inn, was a Troll. A species of Ogre, they had the disturbing custom of entertaining guests only to eat them afterwards. However, with the killing of intelligent life forms banned by the law, Astaltus couldn't carry on that custom. Trying to at least fulfill the instinct to entertain guests, he opened up his inn… apparently.

"There are many Trolls who choose this lifestyle. We do have our own villages, but only about half of us live in those. The rest are in various places living a life similar to mine," Astaltus explained as he stared at the meat in the pot with a rather gentle gaze. "I have a daughter, but she moved out to some island to take care of small children. I know it might not mean much coming from her father, but she really is a nice girl, so I think the job is perfect for her."

"I see…" Willem replied, then a sudden thought hit him. "So if your daughter's all grown up… by the way, how old are you?"

"I passed fifty just a little while ago."

"… you don't look that age," Willem muttered, then took another look at Astaltus' face.

His facial features alone didn't reveal his age. Although he had plenty of white hair and wrinkles on his cheeks, Willem didn't get an aged impression at all. That being said, he didn't exactly look young either. No matter what age he said, it probably wouldn't have sounded right to Willem at first.

"That's just how Trolls are. It's not like we don't age, but it's not very noticeable. Ah, looks like the meat's ready."

“I’m jealous,” Willem replied casually as he took meat out of the pot and stuffed his face. “… delicious.”

“Hehe, right?” Astaltus smiled happily.

“H-H-Ho ahdg…”

Meanwhile, Elq seemed to be having some trouble, so Willem handed her water. “Don’t force it if you can’t handle hot food.”

“I thought it would be fine,” Elq pouted with tears in her eyes.

Willem understood that she was trying to grow up, but clearly she wasn’t being honest with herself at all.

“By the way, have you gotten used to living here?” Astaltus asked suddenly. “Collinadiluche’s close by, and we’re next to the highway. People of all races are coming and going. Well, even with you guys being markless, I don’t believe that should cause too much trouble.”

“Oh no, no trouble at all,” Willem answered. “I’m thankful for what you’ve done. It’s too comfortable, I feel like I’ve been here all along.”

“Well that’s good to hear. At first it was just supposed to be until Nils gets back, but, if you’d like, you can stay after that too.”

“… ah, how do I put this…”

“What is it?”

“In stories with an amnesiac, isn’t it usually a young woman living by herself who says that line?”

“Haha, well then I can ask, why aren’t you, who wandered into the home of a guy living by himself, a young lady?”

I see. That’s true, we both broke the trope.

“I feel like I’m being ignored,” a girl, much too young to count as a young woman, complained.

“Well, putting fiction aside, I guess I’ll take you up on your kind offer for a bit,” Willem said as he put part of a carrot on Elq’s plate. She made a face. “Don’t be picky with your food. You won’t be able to grow.”

After he finished talking, he remembered that she was somehow (he didn’t understand the reasoning) supposed to pretty much be a corpse. In that case, no matter what or how much she ate, a future of growth did not await her. In the first place, why was she even eating?

“Ugh…”

With tears in her eyes, Elq threw the lump of carrot into her mouth. After a bit of chewing, she swallowed it down. Apparently something must have gotten stuck in her throat, because she immediately reached for the water and gulped it down, then pounded her chest. After a short pause, she smiled proudly. Seeing the lack of a response, she moved closer to Willem’s face, then smiled proudly again.

“Ah, good girl good girl.” He threw some praise her way.

“Yup!” she said enthusiastically.

And she told me to not treat her like a kid…

Willem closed his eyes and wished that these peaceful days, these days so gentle that they felt almost artificial, would continue for at least a little longer.

Chapter 4: In This Twilight World, Even Now

Part 1: The Fairies of Collinadiluche

After being tapped and touched all over her body, Aiseia then had a light shone up against her eyes to check their movement, was forced to drink medicine for test purposes and answer questions about her mood, and, while a small amount, had her blood drawn.

“Uhhh, having my body played with like this, I can’t get married anymore…” Wearing only a gown over her bare skin, Aiseia sat up on the patient bed. “Anyways, the inspection’s over now, right?”

No response. The Kikuroppe doctor made a troubled face as he stared at her medical records. As a general rule, reading the expressions of other races with different facial structures was no easy task, but, still, there were times when the message got across.

“… you really pushed yourself,” the doctor said faintly, as if struggling to speak.

“Ahaha, well, my stubbornness is the one thing I always have confidence in.” Aiseia shrugged off his comment with her usual laugh as she buttoned up her gown.

“Your life force is all wilted. Your body is forgetting what it means to live. If you receive a wound, it most likely will not heal. The strength depleted by igniting Venom will never return.”

“Mhm, I had a feeling that was the case.” She responded to the Kikuroppe’s serious tone with the most cheerful voice she could manage.

“Next time you stand on the battlefield, I don’t know whether you’ll be able to come home.”

“I guess so. Well, it’s finally my turn, huh.” Still sitting on the patient bed, Aiseia swung her feet back and forth. “To be honest, living so long, my mind’s been the one suffering lately. The ones I want to live keep dying off, and meanwhile I keep living this meaningless life.”

“There is no such thing as meaningless life.”

“Ah… true, we aren’t even life.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to mean it that way? It’s not good to sympathize with a disposable tool.”

“It’s true that many people think that way, but they are all people who don’t know you guys directly, people who aren’t even told that the fairies have individual personalities. We don’t think of you guys as dis–”

“If you doctors don’t send us off to our deaths, Regul Aire can’t be protected.” Aiseia cut the Kikuroppe’s words off midway. “That’s why we’re not recognized as a race. That’s why we’re treated as weapons without rights. It’s necessary, because everyone needs to be able to properly use and dispose of us without hesitation, am I right?”

“Yes,” the doctor said in a bitter voice with a heavy sigh. “I’ll recognize that much. But what we think individually is our own choice.”

“If there are too many adults who spoil us, we might start saying ‘I don’t want to die so I won’t fight’, ya know?”

“… I suppose.” The Kikuroppe’s single eye turned away.

“Hm. You’re acting a little suspicious. Are you hiding something?”

“Well, it’s nothing important, but… if, just hypothetically, you guys maybe didn’t have to fight anymore, you could maybe continue living, what would you want to do?”

“Ah, a very sudden question.” Aiseia thought for just a little. “If this is just hypothetical, then, I guess pretty much just what I’ve been doing this whole time.”

“This whole time?”
“Spending everyday leisurely over at the warehouse in the forest. The little ones playing noisily, our childlike mother figure scurrying around… watching all of that while relaxing with a book. It’s so

stress free, my life span keeps getting longer."

"… haha, I see. Yes, I see." The Kikuroppe nodded repeatedly. "Like I thought, you should live a long life," he said, defeating the whole purpose of their conversation.

Lakish's body tuning ended. The good numbers indicating her impressive natural ability earned her praise from the doctors. And with each compliment, Naigrat's mood sunk deeper and deeper. After all, how could a girl be happy after hearing praise of her high functionality as a blade or a bomb? If Lakish had talent, then it would be better if an opportunity to use that talent never came. Naigrat hoped it wouldn't. *Stay away!*

"Ooohh!"

"Ahh…."

Tiat and Lakish let out synchronized sighs of admiration.

The Barley Market, one of Collinadiluche's foremost tourist attractions. Originally, it was, as the name implies, a wholesale market which dealt only with barley. Once another market was built close to the harbor district, it lost its role and became just a popular plaza. Various artists displaying their talents dotted the wide open space. A Ballman clown juggled countless knives, a Frogger magician breathed a thin column of fire, and a group all wearing matching masks filled the air with lively music.

"Wow, wow, wow!" The curiosity of a child, once unleashed, knows no bounds. Tiat sprinted this way and that from one crowd to the next. She pulled Lakish along, who let out screams as they went.

"H-Hey, don't run so fast! Don't forget that you guys are being watched!" Because of the formal procedures for handling weapons in the Winged Guard, when the Leprechauns went outside, they required one accompanying officer at the very least. The pitiable fourth officer who got stuck with the job chased the two around as he yelled after them helplessly.

Naigrat watched with mixed feelings. "… it would have been nice if we really did come here just to sightsee."

She knew it was a hopeless wish. The girls were here to prepare for battle, a battle which they shouldn't have needed to be involved in. But only because of that was a little sightseeing allowed, a selfish request which would have usually never gone through.

Speaking of selfish, there was Nephren, who, as Naigrat saw earlier, was not dead after all. However, she wasn't exactly fine either. Having gone through a transformation in a different meaning than Kutori, Nephren would never again return to the fairy warehouse. Naigrat felt lonely, but not sad. The world is a big place, and the sky is a narrow part of it. Being able to believe that Nephren was off somewhere doing well gave Naigrat enough comfort. For those who had already passed away, however, she couldn't even wish that.

"Hey, Naigrat, this way this way! They're having an arm wrestling competition! Want to enter with this guy!?"

Looking over, Naigrat saw Tiat waving her hand enthusiastically, the fourth officer managing a confused smile yet still rolling up his sleeves, and Lakish bowing in apology. *So cheerful, without the slightest clue of what's going through my head… that's very good.*

"… alright, but…" Naigrat waved her hand in return. "If I enter, the competition will end right away!" she said, then ran over to where the kids stood.

For all things, always try asking. Upon asking if she could enter the Central Grand Library with the expectation of receiving a 'no', Lantolq instead got a firm 'okay!' from the mayor's daughter, Firacolulivia… or Firu, as she preferred to be called. Then, before half a day had passed, Lantolq got permission to enter.

This gave Lantolq, the one who asked, quite a surprise. After all, they were country bumpkin fairies with no rights. On the other hand, the Collinadiluche Central Grand Library was one of the foremost places where the wisdom of all Regul Aire gathered. The

huge difference in calibre made Lantolq feel as if some punishment would be brought down upon her just for being near the library.

The entrance permission card, handed over to her in an envelope, also looked somewhat like a dangerous weapon. Underneath many imposing stamps were the mysterious words 'The holder is granted permission to view up until secret archive B-47'. *What the heck is B-47? Does it have the kind of secrets where if you know you have to be disposed of?*

"… you think of some reckless things too, Lan," Aiseia mumbled, holding the same entrance permission card.

"Please don't point it out. I am already well aware, and it's crushing me."

"Well then, let's go! I may not be very useful, but I will help you with your research to the best of my ability!" Firu, getting hyped up all by herself, walked forth with strong strides. "I cannot be of any help in your original battle. Even trying would be an insult to the determination of the fairies. So for things that I can do, I will do my best!" A red flame burned in her eyes.

"When she turns on like this, she gets really troublesome…" Aiseia remarked.

"Has this happened before?"

"The technician messed things up a bit…"

That guy again? Why does everyone reveal their annoying side when it comes to him?

They brawled with countless books. Lantolq thought her head would boil over. She liked reading books. She also didn't hate thinking. But all things have a limit. After being stuffed with information beyond its capacity, her head felt very feverish.

"Should we go outside for a bit to rest and organize our notes?" she suggested.

“Hmm, I think I’m gonna stick with this book for a little longer. You can go first,” Aiseia responded.

“I’m going to help Aiseia, so you go ahead. Oh, there’s a good pudding cafe behind this library, so how about you wait there and we’ll meet up?” Firu said.

They’re tougher than they look. “No, we probably shouldn’t split up. Since we’re fairies and all,” Lantolq said, then glanced at the man in the military uniform standing idly beside them.

“I was told by the First Officer to let you act freely as much as possible. But don’t go too far.”

Unexpectedly, he gave them permission. Lantolq had doubts about whether or not it was actually okay, but, if he said it was fine, she wasn’t going to argue.

“… I see. Well then, I might as well,” she said, then, with notebook in hand, stood up.

She found the cafe that Firu mentioned rather quickly. Perhaps because it was located off the main street, not very many customers were present. However, apparently, almost all of those customers were not tourists but locals, meaning that the cafe was good enough to attract regulars.

After taking a seat on an outdoor terrace, Lantolq picked out a milk tea and apple pie from the menu full of delicious looking choices. She then opened her notebook and looked back over some of the things she copied from various books.

“Hmmm…”

What even are Leprechauns in the first place? Why do they exist? Where do they come from, and where do they go? Those were the questions which Aiseia raised one day in the fairy warehouse. The list gave off the impression of the troubles of a pubescent teenager. And, unfortunately, they were precisely pubescent teenagers. Children of other races would probably look for answers to such

questions in philosophy books or fiction, but they were poring over necromancy research books, and the most advanced ones available in Regul Aire at that.

“We really are suspicious things, aren’t we…” Lantolq mumbled, then remembered that she was alone.

Since they had been together for so long, she always got the feeling that Noft was right there by her side. Noft herself didn’t think too much about things and overall wasn’t exactly the brightest, but she was good at listening. Noft could pull words out of Lantolq even when she was deep in thought. As a result, Lantolq picked up the habit of talking to herself. *Well this is no good*, she thought. She was aiming to be an independent woman with everything together, but it didn’t seem to be going too well.

“I don’t seem to be getting anywhere, no matter what I do…”

Lantolq took a bite of the crisp apple pie. Delicious. Just then, a strong wind blew. It scooped a few pages of notes out of Lantolq’s hand and carried them up into the sky.

“Ah…”

She reached out in a panic but couldn’t reach them in time. The moment she stood up to try to stretch further, another gust of wind sent her remaining notes flying.

“A — Ahh!!”

Deeply regretting her carelessness, Lantolq stared dumbfoundedly up at the sky. *Ignite Venom in a hurry and chase them? No, I won’t make it in time. Run and chase them? No, I won’t be able to catch them, and I feel like I’ll just mess something else up. What to do… what can I do?* As she hesitated, time continued to flow, and her notes went up higher and higher and…

“Huh?”

Not higher? As if a snapshot of time had been frozen in place, all the papers suddenly stopped moving.

“What…”

After a brief pause, the notes began to move again. However, this time, they ignored the wind and, as if being reeled in, gathered in the hands of a man standing in the street, an old man with an imposing face wearing a rather conspicuous white mantle.

“A-Ah!? You!?”

“Oh, the girl from the other day! What a coincidence!” Not seeming particularly surprised, the old man in the street started to make his way over, the bundle of notes in hand. “Studying hard, even in a place like this? Very good, very good. The things you learn while young will become your weapons in the future. Of course, you must also learn how to use them or else it’s meaningless… hm?” The old man looked at the bundle of notes and frowned.

“Thank you. They are very important notes,” Lantolq responded.

“Hm, advanced necromancy? A rather strange subject for a student to choose for a research project.”

“Well, I am not a student, and I’m not exactly doing anything as noble as ‘studying’. I’m also not trying to prepare for the future. I just want to know something now.”

“What?” The old man handed the notes over. “… I see. Your hair color. You are also a Leprechaun.”

“Yes.”

For a moment, various emotions whirled around in Lantolq’s head. Those who knew of the Leprechauns did not necessarily have a very good impression of them. She braced herself, afraid of what expression would cross the old man’s face next.

“Oh, then the other young lady must have been your manager. My apologies. I once decided to never see them in person, but now I ended up meeting you and even exchanging conversation.”

What could this mean? The old man’s face twisted in pain ever so slightly, but surely. Neither hate nor discrimination, but rather guilt

seeped out from that expression.

“Um, are you okay?” Lantolq thought it was a foolish question herself. If the man wasn’t okay, it was very clearly her own fault. She wasn’t in the position to put on a nice face and act worried.

“… haha. You’re worried about me? You’re one kind girl.”

“Uh…”

For some reason, he complimented her. Well, ever since they first met, Lantolq got the feeling that they weren’t really on the same page during their conversations. It was a kind of frustrating feeling, as if some important gears didn’t match up yet kept on turning.

“Guess there’s no unmeeting someone you’ve already met. Coincidences are coincidences. Whether you take them as good or bad luck only depends on how you handle the situation.”

“Uh…”

What is this guy saying? In front of a bewildered Lantolq, the old man pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. His large frame looked just a little odd on the small cafe chair.

“There’s something you want to know involving necromancy, correct? Try asking me. I will answer.”

“Ah, the thing we’re trying to research is a bit difficult…”

“I figured. I don’t mind, so ask away.”

He won’t give up. Earlier, the old man took one look at Lantolq’s notes and understood them to be about necromancy. From that, she guessed that he was fairly knowledgeable. However, what they wanted to know definitely wasn’t something that any old wise man would know.

“… what are Leprechauns?” Lantolq tried asking anyway, doubting he would be able to answer.

“I see. You’re getting right to the point. Very good, very good.” The

old man nodded happily for some reason. “Now then, from where shall I start.” He thought for a moment. “Long ago, the Visitors ordered the Poteau to create the Emnetwyte.”

“Huh?” *This has nothing to do with my question*, Lantolq thought.

Not paying attention to her apparent confusion, the old man continued. “They didn’t create them from nothing. They prepared base materials and modified them. There were roughly two types of these base materials. One consisted of the only life which existed on the planet before the Visitors’ coming, the ‘Primal Beasts’. The other consisted of the souls of the Visitors themselves, tired of living a life of endless wandering. As for the modification method…”

The old man pointed to the half eaten apple pie on Lantolq’s plate. “It was the same as that. They wrapped the ‘Primal Beasts’ with their souls, which they shattered into fragments. The souls forcibly overwrote the Beasts’ flesh, casting a large curse on them. What were once ‘Beasts’ transformed into entirely different beings with figures similar to those of the Visitors, in other words, the Emnetwyte.”

“Uh… um, ehh?”

It didn’t match up with the commonly accepted world creation myth. The grand scale of it all confused Lantolq. And, first of all, he still didn’t answer her question. She didn’t even know where to start. However, there was one part that caught her attention: the Visitors used the ‘Primal Beasts’ to create the Emnetwyte.

“But, well, after that, the Emnetwyte grew too much. The number of pies increased, but, unfortunately, the amount of crust didn’t. The crust, the souls of the Visitors, never increased beyond the original amount present when they were shattered. So, with each passing day, the crust grew thinner and thinner.”

“… could that be what is meant by ‘the beasts were released from within’…?” That was a hypothesis which Lantolq arrived at the other day on the land. However, that thought came from an old book she just happened to find. Why was the old man, who didn’t have a chance to read the same book, saying something similar?

“Yes, very good. Did you already figure out that much?” Impressed, the old man looked over the notes on the table. “The ‘Primal Beasts’ were originally undying and indestructible beings. By being sealed inside the mortal Emnetwyte, they changed. Regret. Hope. Spoiledness. Justice. Kindness. Fear. Disinterest. Ignorance. Dragged along by all those various things which lead humans to death, they became beings which represented seventeen types of death.

If those things got released, the Emnetwyte would go extinct. The humans, realizing that, thought of a plan. Luckily, at the time, Visitors still remained, albeit only two of them.”

The Visitors. Even now that legend is passed down, how, a little more than five hundred years ago, the Emnetwyte Braves slew the last Visitor.

“They wanted to use those souls to create new pie crust. However, it failed. They couldn’t recreate what the Poteau did with human technology. The Visitor’s soul didn’t shatter cleanly and ended up in a mess of countless scattered chunks. With no way to cook all the new pie, the end came as expected. Well, I left out quite a bit, but that’s the gist of it.”

“… um.” Hesitantly, Lantolq raised her hand. “That was a very interesting story, but it only explained what the Emnetwyte are, right? I asked about the Leprechauns.”

“Of course, I answered that too.”

Argh, we really aren’t on the same page. However, even if they weren’t on the same page, they were still having a proper conversation. All Lantolq needed to do was decipher his words as if she were reading a difficult old book. If she did that, then surely she would understand. With that in mind, she thought back over his story.

“… could it be…” Then, Lantolq realized. The soul of the last Visitor didn’t shatter smoothly. The new pie remained unbaked, and the ingredients, the soul fragments, remained scattered. “The failed next generation of Emnetwyte that the Emnetwyte couldn’t complete. That is our true nature?”

“Hm. Your understanding is not mistaken.” The old man nodded. “However, I wouldn’t say ‘failed’. Well, the interpretation depends on the person. You can take it optimistically or pessimistically.”

Before that, there was something more important. If what gramps said was really true, then that answered many mysteries that had remained unsolved on Regul Aire for centuries. That couldn’t be right, but Lantolq somehow felt like it was.

“Why do you know this?”

“I’ve lived a somewhat long life,” the old man answered with a shrug.

“If what you said is true, it is not known at all in this world. Why would you tell something like that to someone like me?”

“I owe you girls something.” He smiled with just a slight hint of sorrow. “I cannot apologize nor take anything back. Nor would I be qualified to do so. But I can at least do this much. Anyway, it’s nothing more than a cowardly and selfish old man comforting himself.” He stood up. “I doubt we’ll meet again, but this was valuable time.”

“Ah–”

Trying to stop the old man from going, Lantolq stood up in a hurry, but, in that moment, a gust of wind blew by. Worried that her notes would fly off again, she panicked and closed the notebook. When she looked up again, the old man was nowhere to be seen.

“Whew… I’m exhausted.” Like a student on the way home from school, Aiseia walked over with eyes spinning from overwork. Firu, her condition unreadable beneath her Lucantrobos fur, followed close behind. “What happened, Lan? You’re spacing out.”

“… what are we? Why do we exist? Where do we come from and where do we go”?”

“Laaan?”

“Actually receiving the answer feels… unexpectedly empty…”

“Laan? Hello? Lantolq?” Aiseia waved her hands back and forth in front of Lantolq’s face.

The fork sitting on the plate of half eaten apple pie clanked slightly.

Part 2: The Brave and the Visitor

Suddenly, Elq fell over. While they were cleaning a guest's room, she simply collapsed to the ground, like a string puppet which had its string cut.

"Are you okay!?"

Willem hurried over and held her in his arms. She was cold to the touch. Hardly breathing. *She's like a corpse*, he thought, then realized that she really was a corpse, just one that moved around as if living.

A living person would have gotten a fever or started breathing roughly, and he would have been able to discern the severeness of the condition from that. However, he had no idea what to do when it came to corpses. He also couldn't think of any treatment methods. Calling a doctor seemed pretty useless. *What should I do? What can I do?*

For the time being, he carried her to the bed and let her sleep, although he didn't know if that would help anything. He got the feeling that long ago, or perhaps just recently, something similar happened: someone who wouldn't wake up was lying on a bed, and he was sitting by their side, unable to do anything but shiver. Eventually he couldn't take it anymore and stood up, convinced that there was something he could do, then went to punch someone.

Ah damn it. If punching someone this time would change Elq's condition, even with just a slight probability, he would do it without hesitation. However, now, of all times, he couldn't think of anyone or anything to drive his hardened fist into.

"A wet towel… wait no, is there any point in keeping her cool? Should I warm her up instead? … she's not going to rot or anything, right?"

He stood up every time he thought of a new idea, only to immediately sit down again. This had been going on for a while.

Astaltus told him to forget about work for now and stick with Elq. However, sticking with her while being powerless to do anything actually made him feel worse. *I guess I should go back to work. But I don't want to leave her side.* A debate raging in his troubled mind, he stared intently at his palm.

"Uu…"

Upon hearing a faint groan, Willem's face shot up.

"Wha…?"

He leaned over to take a peek at her face. The color of her skin didn't look as sickly as before. She also didn't seem to be in pain. Seeing the lack of any apparent problems, Willem relaxed his expression.

"Yo." Before revealing his sloppy face, he did his best to smile, activating every muscle in his face. "Finally awake? Work skipping princess."

"Me…? Wha? Did I fall asleep? What about the cleaning?"

"You suddenly fell down in the middle of it. I was worried, you know?"

"Worried…"

"You're really cold."

"Am I?"

While tilting her head, Elq touched her palm to her forehead. Her face remained confused. Well, of course, she couldn't measure her body temperature by touching it with her own body. Willem put his own hand on top of hers.

"Warm," she said.

"Like I said, you're cold. Usually, it's the opposite for overwork and exhaustion. People get fevers. But you're not normal, so I have no idea how to treat you. I really panicked. Thought you might never

wake up again or something."

"Oh, sorry."

"Yes, reflect on your actions. Well, are you all good now?"

"Yeah. I was just a little tired, so, after sleeping, I feel fine."

Willem felt like his entire body relaxed upon hearing those words. He still had some doubts, like whether that state could really be called just 'sleeping', but he didn't have the energy to pursue that any further.

"I see… is there something you want to drink or anything? Something you want to eat? An apple? Should I peel one?" He asked the spaced out Elq in a gentle voice.

"Warm milk. Something a little sweet."

"Alright, leave it to me." He stood up.

"You're kind of nice today."

"I'm always nice."

For some reason, hearing his answer, Elq laughed out loud.

"Here you go." A sweet scent wafted out from the pot which Willem brought over. Inside was heated milk mixed with a little honey and a pinch of cinnamon. "I made it a little on the warm side, but don't try to drink it all at once, okay?"

"It would have been fine hot," Elq pouted as she took a sip. "It's good."

"Right? I've pretty much understood your taste preferences."

"Hmph." Maybe because she interpreted that as meaning a child's preferences, Elq made a sour face. However, either because she realized that she really did have the tastes of a child, or because she was holding undeniable evidence, she didn't complain in response. "… um, can I ask you something?"

“Hm?” Willem looked up as he poured seconds from the pot into his empty cup. “What is it?”

“If… this is just a hypothetical situation…”

“No need to make a big deal out of it, just spit it out.”

“If I were to die in five days, would you be a little nicer to me?”

“Huh?” Willem frowned. He got the feeling that he heard those words before. *But more importantly, that means…* “What are you talking about? Five days is pretty specific… is something wrong?”

Elq’s face clearly read ‘oops’. “Eh? N-No, nothing… sorry, forget about it.” She tightly held her palm against her chest area, right around where the large wound gaped.

“W-Wait, Elq, don’t tell me…”

“I shouldn’t have asked. I thought that maybe I could be the same as Kutori, but I shouldn’t have tried.”

Suddenly, pain shot through area behind Willem’s temples. Memories began trying to surface again.

“Sorry. Let me sleep a bit more.” Hugging her blanket, Elq turned so her back faced Willem.

“Alright. I’ll leave the milk here, so get some yourself.” Suppressing a small headache, Willem left Elq’s room.

Willem and Elq’s rooms were remodeled previously unused rooms in the corner of the inn’s second floor. As he walked down to the first floor, the creaking of the stairs filled the hallways. The inn didn’t usually have very many guests staying the night, but the spacious lounge on the first floor served as a space for customers to enjoy a light meal and some alcohol. In the middle of that lounge, Astaltus sat around a small circular table, drinking from a small glass.

“I heard some talking. Did she wake up?”

“Yeah, apparently she was just tired.”

“That’s good.” Astaltus nodded a few times, a kind smile on his face.

“Wait, didn’t you say you can’t drink? The other day when you declined an offer from a drunk customer. Was that just an excuse?”

“Well, not exactly.” He chuckled in embarrassment. “My drinking habits aren’t too good. It seems like when I drink I go on a rampage. I don’t remember them myself though.”

“Ah… that is pretty bad.”

“My wife and daughter always used to get mad at me, saying that it’s a lot of trouble to calm me down. So, usually, I try my best to not drink. This will be my only drink today.”

“That’s unfortunate. I guess I can’t join you then,” Willem joked with a shrug. Astaltus apologized with a laugh. “But still, I am thirsty. Maybe I’ll have tea instead. You want some too?”

“Yes, I will join you.”

Willem went to the kitchen, scooped some water out of a jar and into a pot, then put it over the crystal stove.

“… about Nils…” Astaltus started.

“Hm?”

“The day he brought you guys here, Nils’ eyes looked very kind. After saying that he would leave the rest to me, he added on ‘I want him to live a normal life this time’.”

“… I see.”

Willem could imagine. He only spoke with Nils for a very brief time, but he understood what kind of man he was to a surprising degree.

“Neither you nor Elq have normal bodies. Also, it seems like you

were not born that way… ah, I have confidence in my judgement of meat. I am a troll, after all."

Willem wished he wouldn't brag about that.

"I'm guessing you two lived a very rough life of exposing yourselves to harm, and that is now over. Your body and mind are exhausted. If you two can live a different life, then I want you to… that's probably what Nils wanted to say."

"So he acts like an actual master when no one's looking, huh."
"Hm?"
"Nothing." Willem didn't actually know what that self proclaimed master had been to him in the past, but he could tell how importantly Nils treated both him and Elq. So he figured that Astaltus' speculation was most likely correct… probably. "Well I'm glad for the concern, but that kind of thing is better if you hear it from–" An uncomfortable feeling suddenly clung onto the back of Willem's neck. "– Hm?"

Did a bug land on me? No, that's not it. He didn't recognize that feeling of discomfort grasping at his skin, but he knew its form.

"Are there any guests staying overnight?"
"What's this all of a sudden? No guests tonight as usual."

"Did you ever piss off a lot of people?"

"Well… I don't particularly remember doing anything that would earn me a long lasting grudge."

Astaltus' answer felt a bit uncertain, but Willem decided to take it literally for the moment. "So it must be a group robbery or something of the sort."

He felt a few hostile presences surrounding the inn. It did make for a good target. The inn, which mainly targeted guests traveling along the highway, was just a little separated from nearby villages. Its relatively large size and clean appearance also gave off an impression slightly on the rich side. And of course, the stores of beer and food must have seemed very attractive to starving

brigands.

“Oh my, is it already that season?” Astaltus asked.

“Wait, the seasons have nothing to do with this… also, why are you so calm?”

“When spring draws near, those type of people increase.”

You say that like they’re insects…

“You can drink tea or whatever, I’ll handle them,” Astaltus said.

“No, I’m the one being hired, so that won’t do. I’ll handle them, so you just drink some beer… oh wait… I’ll prepare some tea now so drink that.”

“You don’t need to worry. I’m used to it.”

“That’s not a good reason… also, you shouldn’t get used to that.”

Willem stood up. His memory was still as sealed as ever, but, even in this situation, he felt no fear nor nervousness. He even felt a sort of nostalgia, as if returning to an old home. Apparently, he lived in a rather dangerous world before.

“Really, it’s fine,” Astaltus insisted.

“No, no, just take a seat.” Willem cracked his knuckles.

If you want to disable someone in silence, then you must first understand your target’s breathing. That holds when you knock him unconscious and also when you steal his life with a blade. If any air remains in the lungs, it makes sound when it comes out. Even if you knock him unconscious in a single blow, he could emit a sound upon impact with the ground. That’s why any skilled assassin knows how to steal a target’s breath so well it almost becomes like an everyday activity.

“… I wonder if I was a skilled assassin or something…”

Willem crept out from the darkness and, aiming for the split second when his target's breath was depleted, wrapped his fingers around his target's neck, then gave his head a jerk, silently stealing his consciousness. The attack succeeded so smoothly Willem almost gave himself chills.

He took a good look at the person collapsed in his arms. First, he could immediately tell that his image of a starving robber was mistaken: the beast man wore an army uniform. In his hands, he bore a gun with a long barrel. They weren't the kind of clothes or firearms which any regular old ruffian could obtain.

"This uniform… the Winged Guard?" In the darkness, Willem couldn't clearly make out the color or shape, but, for some reason, he got that feeling. "But why would the Winged Guard surround our inn?"

The first reason to come to his mind was that a dangerous person was staying there. But that wasn't possible, given their lack of any overnight customers.

The next possibility to come to his mind was that Astaltus was being pursued by the army. Considering his personality, that hypothesis seemed unrealistic yet strangely plausible at the same time. However, Willem felt it leaned more towards the unrealistic side. After all, pursuing a criminal would be a job for the law enforcement agencies of each individual city or island. The Winged Guard, being an organization which protected Regul Aire as a whole, didn't hold the authority to search for or arrest criminals.

The next possibility…

"Me…?"

Almost at the exact moment that question popped into his mind, the light of a lantern suddenly illuminated his body.

"Don't move!"

When they got there he didn't notice, but a few guns now pointed directly at Willem. Well, he expected nothing less from the

guardians of Regul Aire. However, even with devices aimed straight at him threatening to take his life, his mind remained as calm as ever. He felt no fear nor threat.

“What business do you have with our inn? Food? Lodging?”

“I told you to not move!”

“If possible, I’d prefer to keep this quiet. Wouldn’t want to bother our sleeping guests.” Of course, there was only one of those.

“We have found the target. We will disable him upon being granted permission.”

“I grant you permission. Attack!”

Responding to orders, the presences blended in with the darkness all moved forth at once. Putting everything else aside for the moment, Willem focused on the six opponents before him. Guns hidden in the darkness would be a bit bothersome, but nothing he couldn’t deal with. First he would deal blows to the two closest to him, then throw their bodies to destroy the lamps. If the lights went out, it might cause them to accidentally shoot each other, and it would be easier to deal with them one by one. *Alright, let’s go with that.*

Just as Willem made up his mind and prepared to carry his plan out–

“No good.” The voice of a small girl, completely unfitting of the situation, sounded from somewhere in darkness. “Even all together, you don’t stand a chance.”

“I believe I told you to stay back!”

“You did. But I believe I said that I’d move by my own will when necessary.”

The girl stepped forth into the narrow space illuminated by the lanterns. A gray haired, small statured markless. She wore a blank expression which rendered any attempts to read it useless. A simple eyepatch covered her left eye.

"……"

Did I… see her before? Meet her before? No, more than that. We shared something very important… I remember…

"Agh."

Overwhelmed by intense pain, Willem instinctively suppressed his forehead.

"Willem."

She called my name without hesitation. We really must be acquaintances.

"Willem," the girl called again. "Willem, Willem, Willem!" With each repetition, more emotion seeped into her voice. The girl ran forward, straight through the darkness towards Willem. "I finally found you." She threw her warm body into his chest. "I thought I wouldn't be able to keep my promise. I was scared."

The girl's shoulders, so thin they seemed like they would break if he touched them, shivered slightly. Unable to push her away nor embrace her, Willem stood there motionless. He felt a bit envious of the soldiers surrounding them. They too were caught off guard by the situation, but at least they weren't suffering from a splitting headache.

"Do I know you?" he asked, deciding to confirm the situation first.

"Eh?" the girl looked up.

"Sorry, but I can't remember you at all."

"Wha–"

"WHAT!?"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a soundless scream split the air extremely close by. Knocked off balance by the shock, Willem somehow managed to stand straight up again. In front of him floated a strange creature… he had no idea when it got there, or

perhaps it had been there the whole time. A large floating fish, covered with beautiful red and white scales. Or at least, that's what it looked like. However, that couldn't be right. It seemed as if a separate image had been hung up amidst the darkness; the floating fish stood out so much from its surroundings. Without needing much thought, Willem could tell that it had to be an illusion or something of the sort.

"No no no, you think you can get away with saying that!? Now, I may be a little too old to be a representative of a young maiden, and it's true that sometimes my overabundance of life experience prevents me from commenting what I really think, and it's true that I'm too busy worrying about my own family to stick my nose in the business of some random girl, but, as someone who was once a young maiden very long ago, I can't let that comment just now slip by!" The illusion started rambling on about something.

"… uhh…"

"Be quiet, Carma."

"How could I stay quiet what's with this guy does he think of girls he knew in the past as already used up what a typical piece of trash this is too different from what I heard from Elq she really looked up to this guy like the hero of a story so why is he like this like I can't remember you at all what did you get your memory sealed or something I mean come on."

The illusion's rambling suddenly came to a stop. It floating elegantly towards Willem, then poked his forehead with its mouth. "Oh, his memory really is sealed."

"Eh?" The girl blinked in confusion.

"Moreover, only one part of his memory is closed off. I guess there must be some pretty skilled curse casters still left in this world. This sortilege is so high level it might be able to erase an entire concept from the world if used well. Being able to use that on an individual with such precision… that goes beyond great and into just plain creepy territory."

"… apparently I won't be able to maintain my personality if I remember my past. That's why he sealed only the memories related to my past," Willem explained.

"Ahh, I see… wait–" The illusion took a step back in midair. "You can hear me!?"
"Unfortunately."

"What!? Right now I'm supposed to be only seen by my host!"

"It's not that hard to understand," the gray haired girl said with her eyes faced down. "Willem and I both have a part of the same soul inside us. I can't explain the details logically, but that's probably why."

"A soul?"

Without answering Willem's question, the girl removed the eyepatch covering her left eye, then, very slowly, opened that previously closed shut eye, revealing a vivid gold iris, completely different than that of her right eye.

"… that eye." Instinctively, Willem's hand went to his own right eye.
"That side changed color for you, right Willem?"

"I don't really know what's going on, but you really do seem to be familiar with my situation." While his headache was calming down a little, it still continued to shake his brain about. With each heartbeat, his brain screamed in pain as if about to rupture.

"Willem. I have a request."

"I decline." By now, he had figured out that the girl was someone important to him, and that he was someone important to the girl as well, so a large feeling of guilt accompanied those words.

"Listen. The fairy warehouse is going to disappear. I'm not a fairy anymore, but I don't know what's going to happen to everyone else. Naigrat is more worried than I've ever seen her been."

Another wave of pain pulsed through Willem's head. "I said, I

decline," he said, biting down on his back teeth. "I decided to not remember my past. So I can't listen to your request."

"… Willem."

"Well, maybe there's nothing we can do." The illusory fish sighed despite its lack of lungs. "Seal some memories to prevent the Beast from appearing. It's easy to say, but this is a reckless feat. It could break at the slightest opportunity, and, once that happens, resealing is impossible. Given that situation, it's only natural that he doesn't want to get involved with his past."

"But…"

"Anything more is just you being selfish, Nephren. Do you want to make Willem into a complete Beast?"

"……" The girl called Nephren fell silent.

She probably still had words to say. Feelings to release. But she held onto all of them inside her small, tightly squeezed fist next to her chest. *Sorry*, Willem apologized in his mind. It probably wasn't the kind of thing that an apology would resolve. If his past self saw him now, it would probably throw a punch with all its might and send his head flying. But still, his current self already decided its course.

"Well then, Willem. Moving from the past back to the present, do you happen to know anything about Elq?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. Earlier, this Nephren girl called the illusion 'Carma'. He had heard the name before: it was the name of the family member who Elq said would one day come to pick her up. "I've been waiting for you. Right now she's ill, sleeping on the second floor."

"Ill? Eh?" the illusion said, confused. "She's still a corpse, isn't she?"

"The guy that sealed my memory said he chipped away a little at the curse cast on Elq's body. Said that right now she's an undying being infinitely close to a corpse or something."

"Whaa!?"

From that bewildered shriek, Willem inferred that Elq's current situation and Nils' doings were irregular even to an irregular being.

"Take her with you. She's been waiting for her family to come too."

With guns pointed at him, Willem lead Nephren and Carma to Elq. As the three of them talked, he waited outside the room. He didn't try to listen in, so he had no idea what they talked about. After about thirty minutes, the gray haired girl and Carma came out.

"We'll take our leave for today." Carma had become much less talkative than before.

"You're not going to take her with you?"

"I'd like to, but she told me to give her time. She isn't usually very selfish, but, when she is, she really doesn't listen." The giant floating fish let out a giant sigh. "I know I shouldn't ask for favors when we just met for the first time, but can I leave her to you for a little while longer?"

"I don't mind, but, are you sure? Isn't she the daughter of the family you serve or something?"

"Uhh, well, if you put it in really rough terms, then yeah kinda like that."

"I was opposed," Nephren said with a slightly irritated face. "I think we should take her away, even if it means wrapping a chain around her neck."

"Pretty sure you're just jealous," the fish said in return.

"Elq's kind of like a kitten."

"You could at least try to deny it, geez."

What are they talking about? Willem thought.

"We'll come again," Nephren said, then started to leave the inn.

“O-Oi! Where are you going!?” Soldiers followed after her.

“Home. There isn’t any dangerous Beast here.”

“Wait, abandoning our post will not be forgiven!”

“There’s no work to be done here. I’m the one with the authority to decide that, right?”

“That… damn it. What is the officer thinking!”

The soldiers chased after the girl as she walked without hesitation off into the distance. And with that, their unwelcome guests of the night vanished from sight.

“… so who were they?” Astaltus asked, his head tilted in confusion.

“Our pasts chased after us, it seems,” Willem answered jokingly.

“Was it okay for you to send it back home?”

“I don’t have a past,” Willem said with a shrug. “Of course, I don’t know about that one.” He looked up at the second floor.

“Someone from her family came to pick her up, correct? What did Elq herself say?”

“Nothing. She just told me ‘I’m tired so get out’ and drove me out of the room.”

“I wonder if it was okay for her to not go home with them.”

“Who knows. I can never really tell what kids are thinking.”

That wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either. The reason why Elq remained behind was probably because she didn’t want to leave Willem by himself. He was half convinced of that, but, put another way, only half convinced of that. Also, he was deeply thankful for that.

“Anyways, she’s here, so it seems we’re still going to be under your

care, boss."

"Well, of course I welcome that, but…" Astaltus made a conflicted face. "It's difficult to put this in the right words, but, at the very least, please live so that you won't have any regrets."

"I'll do my best," Willem answered with some effort. He had no past. Accordingly, declining that girl's request without listening to it had to have been the correct decision. But that correctness would most likely worsen the girl's situation. For some reason, that thought left a bitter feeling deep inside his chest.

"… this is just something I've heard," Astaltus started.

"Hm?"

"In children's stories or fairy tales, there's the cliche 'lived happily ever after' ending, right? But that itself is something so far separated from reality, only allowed to exist inside children's stories and fairy tales. A dream unrealizable in reality, similar to magic swords or majestic castles and such. Unconsciously, we all realize the futility of the word 'ever after'."

"I'm pretty sure magic swords and castles actually exist, don't they?"

"Now that you mention it, I guess that's true." Astaltus thought for a moment, not seeming to be phased by Willem's little jab. With his index finger pointed up, he continued, "Basically, we unconsciously think of the phrase 'ever after' as as fictional object."

"O-Oh."

"The same time will not continue on forever. Eventually, an end will come to the entire world itself. The important thing is to accept that change occurs and to figure out how to best utilize that to meet tomorrow. No matter how different tomorrow is from today, we can live on. And as long as we are living, we can try to obtain happiness."

"… 'try', huh. At least you're being honest."

“Happiness is not so cheap that even those who do not try can obtain it.” Astaltus shrugged. “No matter how long you stay here, I don’t mind. However, should an opportunity present itself, please don’t hesitate to leave. The place where you belong is wherever you are at that moment.”

“I know.”

Of course, Willem knew why Astaltus suddenly started talking about this stuff. He could regain his memories at any time, and Elq could become a plain old corpse at any time. No matter how much they denied the past or clung on to the present, these peaceful days at the inn would most likely not continue for long.

If, when the end came, he still hadn’t accepted that fact, he would end up cursing the world or fate or some other greater force. He would carry enmity not faced at any concrete person or thing, grudging his inability to simply live everyday normally and peacefully. He would forget how much effort and sacrifice was required to make such a greedy wish come true.

“I know,” he repeated.

These days would not continue for long. But, they were still continuing right now, thanks to Astaltus, Elq, and also the disappeared Nils. So at the moment, he just wanted to be thankful for this time.

With those thoughts running through his mind, Willem put his mouth to his yet untouched cup of tea. Naturally, after sitting out for so long, it had grown incredibly bitter.

The military began to keep watch around the inn, rotating through three shifts. The number of guards went up and down depending on the time of day, but usually hovered around three or four. They mainly occupied two places: the shadow of the neighboring farm’s stone fence and the watchman’s hut at the public bridge a little ways away. Both were separated enough from the inn to render observation with the naked eye impossible, so the soldiers most likely had devices for viewing from afar. They really put a lot of

effort into it.

While it proved to be quite annoying, if Willem and Elq just sat still, the guards wouldn't bring them any harm. As for Astaltus, he took the optimistic stance, pointing out that the army would step in if anything happened, and that they provided free protection from thieves.

Considering that, the soldiers were taking care of them in a way, so Willem once tried offering them some coffee, only to be met with the sourest of faces. He had been planning to start up a conversation and ask why he and Elq were being targeted, but the foul mood of the soldiers didn't exactly provide the most conducive environment for that.

"Guess I can't torture them or anything."

If he wanted to, though, Willem figured he probably could. His body seemed to know various techniques for no apparent reason, like massages and assassination style combat. If he used his skills well, it probably wouldn't be too difficult to destroy a target's will and dignity without destroying their body.

Of course, doing so would certainly destroy his current lifestyle, so there was no point. Accordingly, Willem decided to continue living normally, trying his best to not think about who he was or why he was being watched by the army.

However, normal everyday life began to turn into a somewhat uncomfortable and twisted thing. He knew that the end to these gentle days was slowly, but surely, approaching.

Part 3: That Morning

At that moment, Naigrat was faced with a decision of extreme gravity, the likes of which she had only come across less than ten times in her entire life: a sandwich with thickly sliced bacon, or a milk stew with chamo cow liver. Which one should she choose for her breakfast?

She already knew that the bacon sandwich here was top notch, but the problem lied in the fact that she had never heard of a chamo cow. Liver tended to differ greatly from restaurant to restaurant, so, in essence, ordering the stew would be a bit of an adventure.

Eating is living. Choosing what to eat is equivalent to choosing how to live.

"Ughhh…"

With a dead serious face, Naigrat glared at the breakfast menu.

At that moment, Lantolq was deep in thought. Spacing out with her eyes on her Dug Weapon, she thought and thought in attempt to resolve her adolescent troubles. What were they? Where did they come from, and where did they go? And once gone, that cycle repeated over and over again naturally. What should they do?

Suddenly being told that they were fragments of a god, she of course found it hard to believe yet, at the same time, for some reason, also extremely persuasive. Rather than gaining new knowledge, she felt as if something which had been lurking at the bottom of her stomach for many years had been translated into words. She couldn't deny it, but, what in the world should she do?

I wanted to be like Kutori, Lantolq thought for the first time. Kutori threw away things like the reason she was born as a Leprechaun or the reason she had lived so far and held her own reason to live on. She found that reason and lived a proper life. Lantolq knew it wasn't something to casually aspire after, but, still, she couldn't help but be envious of that strength.

At that moment, Aiseia was reading a book. To be specific, she was reading a cheap fiction novel, not related in any way to the important books stored in the Grand Library. She bought it at a bookstore in town just the other day. The new brand new seventh volume of “The Torn Triangle”, it, like its prequels, told of people devoting their hearts to cheating and adultery in the name of true love.

But it was exactly in times like these, reading such exaggeratingly comical stories, that she could really look at herself and the other fairies objectively — that’s what was running through Aiseia’s head. Almost all of the romantic relationships appearing in the book ended in disaster. A love in which finding happiness is forbidden ends in a way where no one finds happiness. She felt a strange sense of closeness with that theme.

“Haha.”

The main female character found her sixth adultery partner, counting from the first volume. He happened to be a junior to her third partner and, perhaps trying to make a personality for himself, always stuck a strange ending onto everything he said.

“Sixth guy, huh…” she murmured with a laugh. “If there was little more time, maybe I could’ve slipped in too…”

At that moment, Grick was on the west coast of the 13th Floating Island, in the harbor district of the Elpis Mercantile Federation. On the surface, he was there as a pilot hired by an influential merchant from Collinadiluche, and, in secret, he was there to gather intelligence on the various merchant groups and large movements of money within the country. Someone high up in the Winged Guard, apparently even higher than Baroni Makish, had requested him to do the job. Since the gray haired young lady, Nephren, said that she was fine alone, he didn’t need to forcefully stay by her side, so he accepted.

“I don’t think I’m very suited for this though…”

After all, why should a salvager who dedicated his heart to the treasures of the land have to be stuck observing some stranger's back up in the sky? He had complaints, but, of course, no man abandons work he already accepted.

Sighing internally and taking a look around, he spotted a few curious faces. A few wealthy merchants hailing from Elpis but residing in Collinadiluche were coming into the 13th Island, all separately.

Could there be some kind of big conference? No, if that were the case, merchants from other islands would be here too. Why are a bunch of merchants all from the same city coming here as if they planned to meet beforehand… or maybe they did plan beforehand.

The merchants almost seemed like birds escaping from a sinking ship.

"… no, it can't be…"

Grick got a bad feeling.

At that moment, Nephren was aboard an airship bound for the 2nd Floating Island.

"I met your friend," an old man said without the least bit of a smile.

At the meeting with Naigrat earlier, the man called himself an advisor to the Winged Guard. In truth, though, he was none other than the Great Sage Suwon Candel, the creator of Regul Aire and its eternal guardian. Upon some consideration, Nephren realized how amazing it was to meet face to face with a legendary figure. However, feelings of admiration did not stir inside her as much as she expected. That was probably, or actually most definitely, because of Willem. After being around him for so long, she had gotten used to the non-amazingness of amazing people and the amazingness of non-amazing people.

"Friend?" she asked.

"I didn't get her name. She had long blue hair, and seemed strong on the inside."

“Ah.” Nephren quickly understood that it had to be Ran.

“She was a good girl. She was trying to live with all her might.”

“?”
Nephren didn’t understand what the old man was saying. Obviously, a living being lives with all its might. The Leprechauns were no different, despite not technically being alive.

She heard that many more of her friends besides Naigrat were currently in Collinadiluche. However, she ended up here on this airship without seeing any of them.

“I suppose you wanted to meet her?” the old man asked.

“Of course. But I understand why you don’t want to let me.”

Now that the fairy warehouse had gathered so much attention, if Nephren went anywhere near it, her irregular existence would be discovered by multiple parties. That spill of information presented a great risk which would no doubt negatively affect future developments. If she really insisted on meeting them, she probably could have gone in secret. However, setting aside Lan and Aiseia, Tiat and Lakish really didn’t seem like they would be able to keep quiet about Nephren forever. And, even if they did, she didn’t want to force them to carry such a heavy secret.

“If they’re doing fine, then that’s good enough,” Nephren said.

“Ahh, how strong… I think I might cry.”

Nephren swatted away the floating fish who suddenly decided to appear.

Outside the window, far in the distance, Nephren spotted a giant flower pot made of black quartz floating through the air.

“… could that interesting object be the 2nd Floating Island?”

“That’s right.”

“The person you want me to meet is there?”

“That’s right. He’s not a person though.”

Nephren once read in a book about one of the few secluded regions left in Regul Aire. Called the Heart of the World Tree, it supposedly hid great secrets within.

“Oh my, what a nostalgic presence. I see he’s holed himself up in another rather grand place.”

Nephren swatted away the floating fish once again.

At that moment, Willem and Elq were out grocery shopping.

The hustle and bustle of morning started very early in the city of Collinadiluche. The morning grocery market served as one of the main causes of this. Numerous stalls packed tightly into a few plazas, all displaying fresh goods in front: beans, vegetables, salad, meat, potatoes, eggs, bread, ice, chicken, spices. And lastly, of course, there were the hordes of customers, overflowing with energy.

Willem looked down at his shopping list. Today, he needed to buy a bit more ingredients than usual, so taking a moment to think first seemed like it would be much more efficient than simply wandering around the stalls without a plan.

“Hey, hey Willem! What’s that? Is it food?” Elq tugged at his sleeve, pointing to a stall with stones of various colors out for display.

“Not a food, more like a utensil. Some Reptrace put that in their stomachs to grind down their food instead of chewing with their teeths.

“Ohh…” Elq stared with sparkling eyes, as if the stones had precious gems.

“Don’t get any funny ideas. When it comes to bodily functions, the race wall is mercilessly thick.”

“Aww…”

Elq looked disappointed, but, no matter how much she begged, this was one thing that Willem could never let her try. At the very least, it would lead to a rather upset stomach. At worst, it could lead to death.

“Then… oh, what’s that? What is it? Can I try too?”

“That’s exactly what it looks like: wood. Doesn’t go too well with your stomach or mine.”

“Aww…”

Her voice sounded disappointed again, but her eyes soon began darting around the market, searching for the next interesting object. Willem figured it would be best to finish up their business before she found anything too weird.

“Ah.”

“Hm?”

However, right after that thought passed through Willem’s head, Elq’s eyes stopped. Their gaze focused on not a stall in the market but a regular shop beyond, an old hat shop. Following her gaze closer, Willem saw that the thing which captured her attention was a large brimmed hat displayed through the window.

“Hm? You want that?” he asked.

The clothes Elq now wore were apparently those worn by Astaltus’ daughter at a young age. At the moment, she had also borrowed a hat whose color matched her outfit. Willem thought her clothes looked perfectly fine on her, but, if Elq wanted to be more fashionable, then he didn’t want to stop her.

“Eh… n-no–”

“No need to hold back. It’s not that expensive, I’ll get it for you. Since I don’t spend too much usually, I have quite a bit saved up.”

“No, I don’t want it. Really, it’s something else!” Elq shook her head rapidly.

“I see.” It was a bit unfortunate, but he had no choice but to give up after hearing her deny so much. “In that case, I guess we’ll finish up our shopping without any detours.”

“O… kay.”

Once again, he set out amongst the sea of people. Elq followed close behind, but once every few seconds she turned around. She obviously still had interest in that hat. *Maybe I should buy it in secret and give it as a present*, Willem thought. It might be hard to find time to go buy it without Elq noticing, but he figured it was worth a shot.

Then, one moment, for no real reason, Willem looked up at the sky. He spotted a single middle sized airship leisurely hovering above. By itself, that didn’t present a very unusual scene. After all, Collinadiluche originally developed as a trading town, so many airships constantly flew in and out of the harbor district. At any given time, day or night, not finding anything at all flying through the sky would probably be more rare.

Despite that, Willem got a strange feeling about that airship hovering above. Something just felt… off. He couldn’t explain it very well. To raise an example, its altitude was oddly low, not low enough that it risked crashing into any buildings, but still low enough that Willem could make out the organization name written on the ship’s hull. In addition, that name gave off a rather strange impression: The Order of Annihilation Service History.

The name sounded so much like a joke that Willem couldn’t help but read it over and over again. Also, for some reason, he felt like he had heard it before. He began to feel his head hurting a tiny bit as well. Could it have some connection to his past? He wanted to believe that he never belonged to an organization with such an embarrassing name.

“Willem? What’s wrong?”

A tug on the sleeve pulled Willem out of his thoughts and back into reality. “Ah, it’s nothing.” He returned his gaze from the sky back to earth. “Let’s get going. If we don’t hurry up, we’ll miss all the good

meat, and Astaltus will probably be disappointed."

"No doubt about that."

The two of them laughed.

— *Boom.*

"Huh?"

Instinctively, Willem returned his gaze to the sky. He spotted black smoke gushing out of the bottom of that airship, from the area near the burning spell reactor. After a moment's delay, someone let out a scream, then, after another moment, a collective scream rose up from the crowd. Within seconds, a panic broke out. The airship lost its balance, its ability to keep afloat clearly damaged. From the eyes of anyone at the scene, it was obvious that the ship would soon fall completely.

In the midst of the chaos, the waves of people threatened to sweep Elq away.

"Stay close!"

"O-Okay!"

Willem stretched out his hand. Their fingertips touched, connecting them as they tried to reel each other in.

Then, once more, he looked up at the sky. The column of black smoke only grew thicker, the airship tilted downward at an accelerating rate, and the ship body began to warp as it failed to support the weight, all while the screams coming from the ground grew ever louder.

Next, Willem saw it. Towards the back of the airship, where stabilizing ballast would usually be piled up, a large rupture had opened, and, out from there, *something*, obviously not gravel or burlap sacks, poured into the sky.

What is that?

Due to the sun, he couldn't see it very well, but he could make out a faint silhouette. Overall, the objects took the shape of ribbons, or, to make a comparison, large snakes. However, instead of scales, countless hair like protrusions grew out from their bodies. They were strange animals. Or rather, they were strange things which he didn't know if he could call animals or not. And, for some reason, their name popped into his head, as if it had welled up from the bottom of his stomach.

"No… they can't be…"

Apparently, Elq had seen the same thing and arrived at the same possibility. Willem knew those things very well. They had given him memories he would never forget. Even with his memory sealed, his mind and entire body were trying to recall them, those things that once, in a faraway dream, stole everything and anything he held dear.

"Aurora…" he muttered, standing frozen in shock.

Part 4: The Character of a Brave

It was widespread common knowledge that the 17 Beasts held the position of the largest threat to all living beings, but the concrete nature of the Beasts was not very well known, mainly for two reasons. First of all, many mysteries surrounded them, so not even researches knew any details. Secondly, since, as a general rule, those who encountered the Beasts never returned home alive, hardly anyone actually had any direct experience with the creatures.

In other words, almost no one living on Regul Aire had ever considered the possibility of a Beast attack. Even for soldiers of the Winged Guard, the situation hardly differed. The large majority of them had never directly seen a Beast, so, regardless of mental preparation, they simply weren't used to these enemies.

On top of all that, the Beasts couldn't fly. The Teimerre could drift through the air under the right conditions, but that was about it. As a result, the chances of spotting a Beast other than the 6th without going all the way down to the surface were zero.

Basically, Collinadiluche had a fatal lack of knowledge regarding the Aurora.

Terrible chaos descended upon the command headquarters of the Winged Guard. Damage reports came flying in from this way and that. Actual wreckage caused by the Beasts took up about half of those, while the other half consisted of accidents or incidents caused by panicked citizens. And most likely, the majority of the events reported in both categories never actually occurred. Reliable information was a hopeless dream in the midst of the nightmare encompassing the city. Yet still, reports of trouble necessitated military action… the serious soldiers just trying to do their job only contributed to the chaos.

"I guess this is where we come in," Aiseia said with a yawn as she rubbed her eyes.

Sitting inside, she pretty much had no idea what was going on outside. That Beasts had fallen from the sky and that, based on witness information, the specific type appeared to be the Aurora about summed up the extent of her knowledge.

If she remembered correctly, relatively detailed material on the Aurora had been piled up in the reference room of the fairy warehouse. However, no one expected a sudden battle with them to break out, so those resources had yet to be seriously read. The sole exception, Nephren, who would read any material, no matter how boring, from beginning to end, was no longer with them.

Well, lack of information against the Beasts had been a constant factor in all of their previous battles as well, so it didn't exactly present that much of a problem. However…

"This is a pretty irregular battlefield for us. It makes me a little uneasy that this is gonna be someone's first battle."

"That's true."

Tiat, fully donned in her pajamas, let out a silly gasp at Aiseia and Lantolq's comments.

"I-I'll go too! Let me fight!" Lakish raised her hand fervently as she hurriedly thrusted proper clothes into Tiat's arms.

"No." Naigrat shook her head. "Your weapon hasn't even been decided yet, you know?"

"But we have swords, don't we?"

Naigrat fell silent. They did have swords: Valgalis, Historia, Ignareo, and, in addition to the Kaliyons of those three fairies, one more sword that Naigrat brought as a good luck charm. No one, as far as they knew, was capable of wielding it, so it really served no purpose other than a charm. Even as they spoke, its hilt peeked out of Naigrat's jumbo sized backpack.

"But…"

"I don't want to just wait around. I won't be able to sit still. I want

to… maybe I won't be of much use, but I at least won't drag them down!"

A slight spike of pain struck Naigrat in the chest.

"No, you can't go. I can't expose a child who hasn't finished post tuning basic training to such danger. You've only successfully used that sword in a test. That doesn't mean you'll be able to use it in a real battle, you know?"

"But!" Lakish raised her voice even louder. Just then,

"Excuse me, young ladies," a man's voice butted in from the side.

Turning around, Naigrat spotted a few men standing there wearing fresh new suits. An Orc stepped out from amongst the group and smiled. Looking closer, she noticed bandages wrapped around his body here and there under his suit.

"You're… the one from Elpis!" It only took a split second for anger to fill Naigrat's voice.

"Ah!?"

"M-Miss Naigrat, what a coincidence meeting you here." As the rest of the men cowered in surprise, the orc managed to stand his ground. "It seems like the situation has become quite grave. While I may not have much to offer, I came here wondering if I could be of any assistance."

"How dare you say that!"

According to what Naigrat had heard, Elpis smuggled Beasts onto the island. In other words, the men standing in front of her could very well be responsible for this entire mess. Even as they spoke, dozens were being slaughtered in the streets. The Winged Guard and city forces were probably moving on the defense, but their ordinary guns and cannons would have little effect on the Beasts. Coupled with the utter confusion enveloping the city, she didn't see how they could accomplish much.

"It seems we have a misunderstanding. The chaos outside was not

caused by us. According to witnesses, it seems to be an act of the Annihilation something or rather, a criminal organization in this city." The Orc continued to boldly spout blatant lies. "Please don't make such a frightening face. We have come here today solely with the pure intention of lending a helping hand." He waved his bandaged hands in an attempt to show his lack of hostility.

"With the firepower that the Winged Guard can formally utilize, excuse my rudeness, I doubt they will be able to stand up to their foes. However, today, we just happen to have an airship with our weapons on board docked in the harbor." Then, as if just remembering something, he added, "Oh, of course, we brought the weapons here following the proper procedures. I wish to utilize them to exterminate our enemies."

"Th…" Naigrat understood the significance of another island's army being deployed in the city. Anyone who studied the slightest bit of history would know. "That will never be allowed! Under the Constitution of Regul Aire, this falls under the jurisdiction of the Winged Guard!"

"No, no, you are mistaken." The Orc's entire face went into making one grand smile, as if he came all this way just to say these words. "We've already talked with the higher ups of the Winged Guard."

"… eh?"

"Oh, one more thing. I think the Orlandri Trading Company will contact you soon enough, but, out of the kindness of my heart, I will tell you now." Acting as if he suddenly remembered something, he added on, "Concerning your post and that little shack, things have already been decided, including a concrete schedule. Also including, of course, the *equipment* stored there."

"L-Lies."

"Aw, don't make that face. The facial expressions of the markless are so hard to read, but that face they make when contemplating their helplessness alone is different. It's so obvious I can't help but smile."

The Orc spread out his hands, spun a cane around, and put on a silk hat, both of which seemed to come out of nowhere. “Well there you have it, Miss Naigrat. This town is our stage, so it would be best to avoid foolish actions like deploying the fairies without permission. The treatment your cute, precious dolls will receive once they leave your hands… being as wise as you are, I’m sure you understand the right decision.”

With that, the men went off towards the command room, led by the Orc, who stopped just short of bursting out in laughter.

“… whew, the Winged Guard’s more rotten than I thought up there,” Aiseia mumbled.

“Eh?” Tiat raised her head.

“It’s possible that they were forced to agree to a contract before knowing that it would be this large scale. Like doing a little dirty work just to make some extra spending cash but then realizing that it’s gone too far to turn back,” Lantolq added on.

“Ehh?” Tiat looked over at her.

“So basically, Elpis is confident that they can clean up the Beasts rampaging around right now and look cool, right? … it’s kind of frustrating, but if they can do it, then maybe that’s fine,” Lakish said.

“Ehhhhh!?” Tiat screamed. “L-L-Lakish, did you understand all that talk!?”

“Y-Yeah… not the difficult parts, but I think I got the general picture, maybe…”

“I’m that only one that didn’t get it!?”

“I-It’s okay, I’ll explain it now, so calm down.” Lakish pushed back Tiat, who looked just about ready to latch on to her. “Let’s see, you know Elpis, right? On the 13th Floating Island, sort of like a slightly distant neighbor country to here. Well, technically a city state.”

“Yeah, the country that’s always mean in ‘The Flames of Elpis and Shadows of Pitos’, right?”

“Well, yes, but forget about your impression from crystal movies. Anyways, Elpis, uh… this is just a guess, but they probably want to start a war.”

“Why,” Tiat said with a face of complete not understanding.

Lakish looked over to Aiseia, who continued the explanation.

“You see, war has this magical effect that can postpone all the problems within a country. For example, no matter how much you and your neighbors hate each other, if someone with an axe might come and attack at any time, you can’t afford to be fighting with your neighbors, right? Also, even if you’re poor or hungry, in a kill or be killed situation, there’s no room for complaining. The existence of an external enemy obscures any internal problems.”

As she explained, Aiseia made a scowl fitting of the unpleasant topic. “But when peace returns, so do all those problems that were swept under the rug. When no guys with axes are coming to attack you, you can’t help but remember how much you hate your neighbors. When it comes to that, there are two choices, both of which lead to the same outcome. Either start a war with your neighbors, or find another external enemy to start a war with.”

“… is getting along with your neighbors not a choice?” Tiat asked timidly.

“It is. You just gotta find your next enemy. Until recently, the Teimerre served as that external enemy, so, in general, everyone in Regul Aire got along. But now that word is out that the Teimerre won’t be showing up for a while, some countries are beginning to remember ‘oh yeah I actually used to hate those guys’. And the one country among those which immediately took action is Elpis.

They chose a pretty clever method too. If they simply attacked their neighbors, they would be known as a threat to the peace of Regul Aire and made into a new external enemy. So they changed their approach. They called in an enemy from outside and let them go

wild in their neighbor's backyard. Then all they have to do is walk into their neighbor's backyard and valiantly slay the intruders. Their neighbors will thank them and willingly come under their control and everyone lives happily ever after." Aiseia clapped sarcastically.

"So basically, they're the ones who brought in the bad guys, but they're going to play the hero and force others to be indebted to them?!" Tiat exclaimed.

"Oh, yes that's exactly it. You catch on pretty fast, huh."

"B-But, being the hero is the Winged Guard's job, right!? Someone else can't just take it."

"They took care of that first. If the Winged Guard, who are supposed to be the heroes, can't be of any use, then Elpis can swoop in and save the day, stealing all of the public trust that the Winged Guard's built up over the years."

"But… that's…" All out of questions, Tiat fell silent.

With nothing more to explain, Aiseia and Lakish followed suit.

"There you are." With light and swift footsteps unbefitting of his giant body, Limeskin came running down the hallway. "Naigrat. Return the fairies to their rooms."

"… yes, I know," Naigrat answered softly.

"Wait a second. Don't tell me you're planning to do as they said!" Lantolq stepped in between the two.

"That is exactly right. That is my superiors' orders, and also one method to end this danger with the least possible damage," Limeskin answered.

"But, in order to not let them have their way, we need to make it so that their weapons don't produce the results they're hoping for. Also, if we go out now, we might be able to reduce the damage to the city, even if just a little bit," Lantolq protested.

“And then you guys might suffer more than just a little bit of damage,” Naigrat said, her voice sounding almost like that of a frightened kitten. “We’ve continued to send you guys out to battle all this time because we had no other choice. No one else but you guys could stand on that battlefield. If that weren’t the case, I never would have let you do anything so dangerous. But…”

Strength returned to Naigrat’s eyes. “This is not one of those battlefields. This is no more than a hunting ground for Elpis to release, fight, and capture their own prey. There’s no reason for you guys to have to risk your lives for this.”

“Then everything will go as they planned, you know? Are you going to just keep quiet and let them crush the fairy warehouse?”

“Of course not. I’ll resist until the very end. But that’s my battle, not something for you guys to shed blood over.”

“Hmph.” Meanwhile, Limeskin nodded with a somewhat calm face. “I will ask one question. Has the guidance of the wind reached the caverns of your hearts?”

“… what?” An utterly incomprehensible lizard line came out of nowhere for the first time in a while.

“A single blade does not choose its battlefield on its own. If there is a battlefield one wishes for, one must be a warrior. In one’s fingers gripping the hilt, in one’s arms supporting the blade, one must carry the wind.”

“… um…?” It was no use. Lantolq had no idea what he was trying to say. “Aiseia.” Poking her friend sitting beside her with her elbow, she whispered, “You know a lot of weird random things. Do you get what he’s talking about?”

“You’re the one who’s studied ancient languages and stuff,” Aiseia whispered back. “You’re more qualified than me when it comes to different cultures.”

“I just do it for fun, I’m not actually good at it. All that reading isn’t being of any use right now.”

“Well I have no idea what’s going on either.”

“… um, First Officer Limeskin.” As the older ones went back and forth with each other, Tiat took half a step forward. “We love this city. Does that count as a reason?”

“Should you fall here, the next land to come under attack will be further hurt. Do you understand that?”

“No, not really, sir.”

“Hm?”

“But if Kutori were here, I’m sure she’d say this. Who cares about the next place? A fairy soldier fights for what’s important. No matter the reason, I can’t run away in such a crucial moment… something like that.”

Naigrat gulped. Aiseia made a weird noise. Lantolq gawked silently with eyes wide open. Lakish alone showed no signs of surprise.

“One who chases after the back of a warrior will one day grow up to be a warrior as well… I see.” Limeskin, perhaps in a cheerful mood, emitted an odd sound from his throat. “I grant you permission to attack. However, do not overexert yourselves.”

“First Officer!?” Naigrat exclaimed, almost like a scream.

“There is no way around it. If we force them to stay, they may decide to break orders and move on their own.”

“That’s… true, but…”

“And more than anything, this young warrior has without doubt displayed the wind.” The Reptrace’s giant palm lightly patted Tiat’s hair. “Not just anyone can tie together the wind, nor are they allowed to. That is all.”

As the others notified her beforehand, Lakish stayed behind. Seen off by Lakish’s pale face as Naigrat embraced her with full strength, Lantolq, Aiseia, and Tiat flew off into the morning sky.

Looking down from above, Lantolq realized that she had never flew even once since coming to Collinadiluche. Gazing at the town from a different angle gave her a strange sense of excitement, like being able to peek backstage, or like neatly returning a book to the shelf after enjoying it, then taking a step back and looking at its spine.

However, when she dropped her altitude just a little bit, she could see the wounds infecting the city. Rows and columns of fallen buildings, flat as if cut down in one fell swoop. A single wrecked airship sitting right in the middle. And then, here and there, people lying on the ground, transformed into fountains of blood. Some had red blood, some blue, and some close to colorless. The corpses of a variety of races dotted the streets of town like broken dolls.

To put it objectively, it was quite a ghastly sight. As an extension of their weak sense of fear, the fairies didn't have a very strong reaction to events or scenes related to death. A few corpses lying around wouldn't be enough to evoke any fright or similar emotions. That being said, such a sight overflowing with irrational death and destruction naturally made her angry.

"Ah! Over there, over there! The new weapons!" Tiat exclaimed, her whole body showing the excitement at her big discovery.

Turning to where she pointed, Lantolq spotted a giant suit of metal armor walking down a large avenue below them. It looked big enough to fit two or three giants the size of Limeskin. From its awkward movements, though, she could tell that whatever was inside didn't seem to be an actual Giant.

A few Aurora noticed the giant armor suit's presence and attacked. Using their countless hairs, they crawled up to the armor's feet in the blink of an eye, then attached onto its shins, like leeches in a swamp. However, their needles, supposedly strong enough to pierce steel when hardened, bounced right off the armor, and the Beasts were thrown back onto the stone pavement. A moment later, a colossal war hammer crushed them to bits.

"It's… a bit stronger than I expected," Aiseia commented.

"I agree completely," Lantolq said.

Until just recently, she had thought of the guys from Elpis as arrogant fools. She figured that they didn't actually know anything about the Beasts and had no actual evidence to back up their confidence of victory. However, she seemed to have been mistaken.

The metal armor suit bore a constant covering of intensely ignited Venom, and so did the war hammer. Beasts couldn't be destroyed by normal means, and furthermore didn't take any appreciable damage from anything other than a Venom attack powerful enough to send their body systems into disarray. For that reason, the combination of the Leprechauns and their Dug Weapons had been considered necessary for defeating the Beasts. But before Lantolq's eyes, that metal suit continued to output Venom rivalling that of a Dug Weapon wielding Leprechaun.

"That could really be an anti-Beast trump card…" she murmured.

What piqued Lantolq's curiosity was the source of the armor's Venom, that force on the opposite end of the spectrum from life. Those closer to death could wield stronger Venom. If the armor suit were a mere machine with nothing inside, it shouldn't have been able to use any Venom in the first place. On the other hand, Lantolq couldn't imagine that a race muscular enough to freely move around while wearing that suit would be deficient enough in life force to use Venom either.

This power… it even rivals the output at the instant of the opening of the gate to the fairy homeland. The phenomenon known as the gate to the fairy world, a type of self destruction resulting from a Leprechaun, a very unstable existence, igniting Venom beyond her limit. The literally explosive amount of Venom obtained instantaneously could vaporize any Beast who bathed in the heat directly. To say the least, it wasn't something that could be replicated with technology and engineering.

How in the world… Unfortunately, it wasn't the type of problem that thinking alone could solve. There was probably some cutting edge technology incomprehensible to an amateur like Lantolq at work. But still, she couldn't help but ponder.

She spotted objects which looked like droplets of light pouring out

from the area around the armor suit's right elbow. It looked familiar, but, before she had time to remember where she had seen it, a Beast bit onto the suit's right arm, transformed its countless body hairs into needles, then pierced. The Venom defense failed to withstand the attack. Penetrated by myriad thorns, the armor plating, most likely forged from steel, weakened and split apart.

"Ah…"

The contents of the armor suit spilled out. Hovering in the sky some distance away, Lantolq still clearly saw it: a large number of the same droplets of light from earlier, and, inside of them, some kind of soft water blue object.

"… eh?"

The next instant after she thought she saw them, they disappeared. As for the armor suit, even after losing one arm, it didn't stop moving. After re-adjusting its grip on the war hammer with its right hand, it brought it down and crushed the Beast who just ripped off its left arm with a fluid motion that almost made it seem like the wound didn't have even the slightest effect.

"Just now…"

She only saw it for a split second. In that split second, she could guess what it was. But that split second wasn't enough to be certain.

"No…"

No doubt, it served as the root of the armor suit's strength. A top secret among top secrets. If what Lantolq just thought of were true, why the armor could ignite and manipulate such an immense amount of Venom could be easily explained.

— No… could it… really be? But no, that's a complete violation of the Constitution. Even if they may obtain that authority in the near future, they don't have the permission now.

Reality and imagination, things she wanted to believe and things she didn't, they all mixed into a jumbled mess inside her head, and, for just one moment, Lantolq's mind turned blank.

Meanwhile, Willem was situated in a place even closer to the metal armor suit than Lantolq, and this place also provided him a clearer view of the ruptured right arm. As a result, he could see everything that happened in that split second when that thing in the armor fractured into light and disappeared. It was enough to know everything.

Inside the right arm of the metal armor suit, there was one small girl, bound to the armor's rivets by countless threads. She had bright blue hair the color of water. Moreover, her hornless and fangless appearance matched that of a markless. Due to a black mask, Willem couldn't see her face. Her entire body had been faintly emitting light. Her entire body had also been pierced by the Aurora. Her over-ignited Venom had been running berserk. Put together, those two made for a fatal combination. He instantly knew that the girl could never be saved.

And then, the light glowed noticeably stronger. Then burst. And disappeared. The figure of the little girl was nowhere to be seen. It had vanished from the world for eternity. Then, suddenly, Willem got that intense headache again.

— If… this is a hypothetical question, okay?

— If I were to die in five days, would you be a little nicer to me?

A voice. Willem heard a voice that should have been locked in a box and sunken to the deep, deep depths of his mind.

— If you were going to die, you at least wouldn't want to disappear, right? You would want to be remembered by someone. To have a connection with someone.

"Ah…"

Fog blanketed his memory. He couldn't recall the face of that girl who spoke those words. The strong feeling that it was something he must not remember blocked his memories from fully replaying.

— Then, what about butter cake?

Blue hair. She had blue hair the color of a clear, cloudless sky. Her

eyes bore the deep blue of the ocean. She wasn't honest at all yet honest at the same time, always put others before herself yet was incredibly selfish. She had that kind of contradicting, impossible to understand personality, but she seemed to be confused at herself too, which meant that there was someone who just recently made her that way.

— W-Wait! Ow! It hurts! I can't breathe! This is embarrassing! I'm covered in dirt and scratches and I haven't taken a bath and everyone's looking — are you listening!?

No. The water blue that Willem saw for a split second just now wasn't the same as the sky blue from his memory. That life that he just witnessed disappear before his eyes was not her's. Obviously. She was already gone.

— I did… I really did…

Willem had wanted to make her happy. He had wanted to cling onto that wish. He had wanted to forget that past and only think about the present and the future. But then, just like now, in the next moment after he made those wishes, he lost both that present and that future.

— Thank you.

That water blue was not her. There was no doubt about it. That little girl was a completely different fairy, but the trigger was strong enough. He had already started to remember. Kutori Nota Seniolis, the girl who wished to be remembered by someone even after she had gone.

"Damn… it…"

A curse escaped his lips, but who was it aimed at? At himself who had forgotten about her? At himself who couldn't maintain his body without forgetting about her? At himself who had now passed the point of no return due to the fragments of his sealed memory surfacing? Or all of them at the same time?

"Willem!" Elq came running over.

“Don’t come!”

“It’s okay. There aren’t any of those Beasts around us anymore.”

“No, not that! There’s one right here!”

Her leather shoes scraping against the ground, Elq stopped mid sprint and stood still. “Willem, don’t tell me…”

“I’m right on the border. I might still be able to turn back now,” he answered in a groaning voice.

He wasn’t just saying that to act strong. The seal that Nils Didek, that good for nothing master who was still living for some reason which Willem couldn’t understand at all, applied to his memory was strong and flexible. Willem Kumesh was on the verge of becoming a mere Beast. His spirit or soul or whatever had mixed with the substance which fell off of the Shiantor, resulting in a transformation of his physical body. His external appearance hardly changed at all, but, on the inside, he had already stepped outside the framework of normal life.

Nil’s seal essentially separated the milk tea inside a cup into two distinct and stable sections of milk and tea. Being stable, some moderate shaking wouldn’t be enough to disrupt the balance. As long as Willem didn’t put a spoon into the cup and mix everything up, the memories that had resurged just now would have eventually faded into oblivion. Then, once that happened, everything would go back to normal. He would be able to return to those leisurely days in the inn.

But it wasn’t too late. He could still turn back. He just needed to wish for it.

“Willem.”

“Don’t come.”

He stood up and patted all over his body, checking its condition. There didn’t seem to be any major problems. He couldn’t see very much due to one eye being closed shut, and his head was overcome with dizzying pain as if someone was banging on a giant bell in

there as always, but his four limbs moved. He still had the bones and muscles of an Emnetwyte. Taking a deep breath and exhaling confirmed that his lungs and diaphragm were in order as well. He could still use all his techniques as usual.

“Wait,” Elq protested.

“Go back to Carmine Lake, Elq Harksten,” Willem ordered sharply as he turned his back to her. “I’m thankful that you stuck with me until now. Now it’s time for you to go where you belong.”

“But…”

“Please, do as I say.” He turned his head around to look at her and let out a cackling laugh. “I can’t bring anyone along with me from here on.”

“Willem!”

Without answering that last plead, he faced forward again.

What am I? Willem thought to himself. *An Emnetwyte. Former Quasi Brave. No specialized Kaliyon. Second Enchanted Weapons Technician of the Winged Guard. Just a decoration. The manager of the fairy warehouse.*

The world ended long, long ago. The story of the Braves came to a conclusion in the distant past. So now, what am I doing here?

He couldn’t remain himself for much longer. In that short interval, he needed to do all that he could. He had no time to be dwelling on the past. The Beasts seemed to have some method of sharing information with each other, for they all came from their original places scattered around the city to gather around their newfound enemy, the metal armor suit.

Each time the armor swung its hammer, the number of Beasts decreased by one. While there was a large gap in numbers, it was clear who had more raw strength. Not many methods existed for facing the overwhelmingly unreasonable enemies that the Beasts were, but an overwhelming amount of Venom was one of them.

While working at full strength, such Venom could not only stand toe to toe with the Beasts, but even overwhelm them.

As time passed, the Aurora steadily disappeared.

“That sure is strong,” Willem muttered.

He could form a general guess as to just what, exactly, the metal armor was. A new anti-Beast weapon developed by some army organization, by constantly utilizing a ridiculously overwhelming amount of Venom in both offense and defense, it could both endure the Beasts’ attacks and make effective attacks of its own, without relying on the amplification of a Kaliyon. *I see. If you can get this stabilized, it’s easier to use than unstable girls wielding swords.* It really was a magnificent invention. If he hadn’t caught a glimpse of what was inside, Willem might’ve wanted one for himself.

“Development must’ve been a pain. If word of what they were doing got out before they could explain themselves, everyone involved would’ve gotten sent straight to jail.”

They must have planned meticulously and prepared thoroughly, devoting vast amounts of time and resources. Willem vaguely recalled being struck by similar feelings of admiration once before. That time, he smashed that crystallization of hard work and effort without hesitation, and this time would be no different.

“Sorry, but I can’t let weapons like you be used.”

He tore off the eyepatch covering his right eye and opened it wide up, exposing his golden pupil. An ashen gray color filled with fury covered his field of vision.

Looks like my inner Beast is pissed off, Willem thought. *Destroy erase return send them home crumble* — an intense urge to destroy welled up from within, along with an endless flurry of words. But, since he had prepared his mind beforehand, he could resist. For about five minutes, he could move this body while maintaining his own will as Willem Kumesh.

Demolishing Nightingale Dash. With a full force descent forward,

Willem closed the distance between him and the metal armor in the blink of an eye. *For once I agree with this voice. Let's reduce this guy to sand*. The armor suit, appearing to have recognized Willem as an enemy, brought its war hammer down with terrifying speed and unthinkable strength. After a brief pause, a violent gust of wind followed the hammer's path.

Damn, that's scary.

While watching his bangs fluttering around, Willem took the last step forward. That small space of a little over half a step provided the perfect distance. Throwing his body into the air, he spun once horizontally to build momentum, then pummeled his fist into one of the joints of the armor suit.

A noise like an iron board smacking against oil rang throughout the air. The Venom from the armor, its pressure raised explosively for one instant, tried to force his fist away. Ignoring the intense pain of his skin melting and flesh burning, Willem continued to push his fist forward. When his arm was jammed into the armor up to the elbow, he grabbed onto the thing inside, then, while snapping countless threads, pulled it out.

A young girl with dandelion yellow hair came out. As Willem expected, she was already deep into a berserk state as a result of igniting an excess amount of Venom. Her entire body emitted faint light. She could explode at any moment.

"Do you want the pain to end?" Willem asked, although he didn't think she could hear him anyway.

The girl smiled faintly, or at least Willem felt like she did. He put his finger to the girl's chest, then, in a gap between heartbeats, lightly pushed inward. Her heart, having its rhythm disrupted with fatal timing, stopped in an instant. With the flow of blood ceased, the Venom could no longer continue to run berserk. The Leprechaun girl, name unknown to him, passed away silently.

No longer able to acquire sufficient Venom to operate, the metal armor suit stopped its movements. Willem pulled out one more girl from within the machine and put an end to her life in the same

way. With a small clap, the two corpses burst into grains of light and disappeared. Standing amidst the grains as they flowed away in the wind, Willem closed his mouth for a moment, as if to mourn their loss.

Inhale. Exhale. He didn't know them. They weren't from the warehouse. In other words, they appeared somewhere in Regul Aire and were captured and used for this weapon before they could be brought to the warehouse. If their luck had been just a tad better, they would've been gathered at the fairy warehouse with the other kids and lived a carefree… even if they would still meet the same end as a weapon, their life up until that point would have been relatively fun. But things didn't turn out that way.

Willem bit down on his lip. This was nothing unusual. From the day he set out to be a Brave, these thoughts and feelings ran through his head time and time again. Whenever he found someone he wanted to save, the situation had already progressed beyond his control.

"… do it." Glaring at the remnants of the metal armor suit with his right eye, Willem gave permission to the Beast inside him.

With a silent cry of joy, the part of him inherited from the Shiantor was released. Its very existence reverted its surrounding environment to its primal form. In other words, almost anything created after the Visitors' arrival returned to either a Beast, dirt, or sand. Once, long ago, the Visitors, or more accurately the Poteau who served them, used the vast land with nothing but ashen sand on it as a base ingredient to create a fertile world. But anything created out of that fertile land could still be called back to its original form.

Whoosh.

With an undramatic sound, the broken suit of armor turned into a mere mountain of ashen sand.

Silence had descended on the area. It was only natural, considering that no one in their right mind would want to stay for long in a place with a violent Beast thrashing about. The townspeople had wisely and swiftly evacuated. Looking around, Willem could only

spot one figure.

“Lantolq.”

Once he called her name, the girl, as if having steeled her resolve, took a few steps closer. However, she showed no signs of closing the distance any further.

The Kaliyon Historia in her hand faintly emitted light, signaling its battle stance. Willem expected no less from Lantolq.

In general, the fairies, perhaps because of their true nature as children, tended to be trusting. Once they got close to someone, they never doubted that someone no matter what. Lantolq, however, was unusual in that she could make rational decisions… or at least that’s what Willem’s faint memories told him. So now, even after seeing Willem’s face, Lantolq didn’t let her guard down and noticed something irregular… Willem decided to not think about the possibility that she had just hated him from the start.

“Since you’re up here, that means the Plantaginesta made it home safely, huh. I was really worried, you know? What are you doing in this city?”

“What are you talking about? I should be the one asking that. Long time no see, technician.”

“Mhm. Are you by yourself today?”

“I wonder. Maybe others are hiding nearby.”

Not only did Lantolq not hide her suspicion, she even used it to restrain him. Willem was once again impressed by her ability to remain calm and think fast. His usual self could detect the presence of a fairy with no problem. The possibility of others waiting in ambush nearby wouldn’t have any effect as a threat. However, in his current state, talking while enduring a constant headache, things were different.

“Is the talk of the fairy warehouse going away related to this guy?” Willem asked as he lightly kicked the mountain of sand.

“Where did you hear about that?”
He heard it from Nephren when she came to visit the inn. At the time, due to his lack of memories, he didn’t think much of it, but now he understood the meaning of those words.

“A lot happened. Well?”

“You are correct. The Elpis National Defense Force, plotting to steal the authority to fight with the Beasts from the Winged Guard, developed this weapon and is showing it off as something stronger than us.”

Lantolq’s answer basically matched Willem’s predictions, but at the same time surpassed them too. Elpis’ intentions were easy to understand, but, given that they actually produced such a powerful weapon, it was hard to do anything to stop them. *Wait, no*. There was one way that Willem could think of, although he couldn’t exactly call it a wise way of doing things.

Agh. His headache continued to intensify. As they stood there chatting, his remaining time only decreased. There was no time to be spending on question and answer.

“I have a question too. Up until now, what–”

“Sorry, but I’m gonna have to refuse any long questions. I’ll tell you what you probably want to know most right now.”

“Eh… ah!?” Lantolq took a huge leap back. At the same time, a lamp, bench, and sign which, up until a second ago, had been nearby where Lantolq was standing transformed into ashen sand and crumbled down. “That power… have you really become a Beast!?”

Willem laughed. “A subspecies of Shiantor. Probably.”

“You’re kidding.”

“The Beast inside me is a hulk of homesickness. It wants to take back the world it once lived in. And that desire leads to the desire to annihilate this current world.”

“But…”

“Living in a world where your hometown’s disappeared is pretty rough, you know?”

Lantolq gulped.

“Well, that’s about it for questions. Shall we begin? Miss guardian of Regul Aire–”

Willem cut off his own words and slightly tilted his body. Then, using what remained of his human body to its fullest extent, began to ‘fall’ sideways at top speed. Demolishing Nightingale Dash, one of the pinnacles of wisdom which the Emnetwyte once created and entrusted their fate to.

Observing Lantolq’s breathing, he aimed for a moment in which she wouldn’t be able to react and closed the distance. *She can’t react in time, she’s done for*… or so Willem was convinced. As always, he stopped a little more than half a step short, then twisted his body. Just like when he killed the two earlier, he aimed for the critical spot in the center of the chest and, going through Lantolq’s blind spots, moved two fingers in for the finishing blow–

He stopped midway. In the narrow gap between Willem and Lantolq, a single large blade had been thrusted in. A tiny burst of heat ran through Willem’s fingertips for a split second. Lantolq’s bangs fluttered.

The Kaliyon, Valgalis.

“Don’t you think doing that just with the two of you is a little lewd?” Right beside Willem, when she got there he had no idea, stood Aiseia with her usual smile. “Can I join in?”

“That’s okay, but I can’t be nice to you, you know?”

“Haha, that response is already nice enough.”

With a flick of her wrist, Aiseia sent Valgalis’ blade into an unnaturally sharp path straight toward Willem’s neck. After bending down to dodge it, the blade, which had been on track to pass

overhead, bore straight down.

“Whoa!?”

Rolling backwards, Willem barely dodged the second attack.

“Oh my, dodging that, huh,” Aiseia said, pretending to be surprised. “It hasn’t missed once yet in actual battle.”

“I can see why.” Willem’s mouth stiffened. Sweat streamed down his cheeks. *So I can still sweat after becoming a Beast*, he thought to himself. “Starting out with an inertial control surprise attack, huh… you seriously have no mercy.”

“Well, truth be told, I am pretty serious about you, technician.” Even as she responded with a joke, Aiseia took no rest and came at him again. He couldn’t feel that much pressure from the Venom on her blade, but that didn’t mean it wouldn’t hurt.

“W-Wait, what are you two doing!?” After a few seconds delay, Lantolq let out a scream.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m accepting the technician’s love.”

“That’s not something for the one on the offensive to say!” Willem shot back.

“I don’t want to hear jokes!”

“Jokes?” After having Valgalis blocked by Willem’s fist, Aiseia crouched down, then, before Willem knew it, had kicked off the stone paving and leaped backwards, opening up distance between them. “We’re not joking, ya know? Lan, you still don’t get why he’s doing this?”

“… eh?”

“You don’t need to tell her too much,” Willem complained.

Aiseia, however, continued, still crouching with one knee on the ground. “He’s giving us a role.”

“I said there’s no need to tell her.”

“The last and strongest fortresses, protecting Regul Aire from the threat of the Beasts. That title drove us off to the battlefield, yet at the same time protected us. The humongous armor suit from earlier is good proof. Now I clearly see how the guys at Elpis want to use us.”

It truly was a magnificent piece of technology. It managed to control all of the enormous amount of Venom resulting from opening the gate to the fairy homeland and running berserk. Instead of ending in a moment’s explosion, the Venom served as fuel sustainable through the machine’s operation. The fairies’ lives met the same end either way, but that way had to be much easier to use them as weapons.

“The technician is going to give us that title once again.” Aiseia looked down slightly. “That giant suit didn’t stand a chance against him — this Beast. If we can defeat this Beast, that proves that our worth on the battlefield cannot be ignored. At the very least, Elpis’ plan will be totally ruined.”

Lantolq let out a gasp before covering her mouth with her hand.

Aiseia slowly stood up as she wiped her eyes. “… he wants to protect the fairy warehouse. And he’s giving his life for it, that idiot.”

“You didn’t need to…” Willem didn’t need his plan to be understood. If he just played his role as an evil Beast needing to be defeated, the rest would have gone smoothly. “… so, you guys. Do you like the little ones at the warehouse?”

“Huh?” Lantolq, caught off guard, opened her eyes wide.

“Hm?” Aiseia tilted her head.

“The reason you fight with your lives on the line, is it to protect them?”

“W…” Lantolq’s face turned bright red. “Who cares about that!?”

Willem burst out laughing. “Ha… haha!” A strong sense of nostalgia came over him. *That’s right,* he remembered. *I once asked Kutori the same question*. That time, he heard the exact same answer that Lantolq just gave. “Ahh, you guys. I really… really…” *Love you guys*. He remembered.

He remembered what he had been trying to do in this world. There were no more battles for him in this world, but if there were those fighting with the same thoughts and feelings as he and his companions once did, then he wanted to at least support them. In place of him, who couldn’t save anyone, he wanted to help them carry out their wish to protect those precious to them.

“Let’s go.”

In his current state, Willem could not ignite Venom. The closer to death one is, the stronger Venom, a force opposite of life, one can ignite. In return, one gets dragged closer to death at an accelerating rate. On the other side of things, those far from death don’t go very well together with Venom. For example, Limeskin and Naigrat, being born as strong and tough races, couldn’t even ignite any Venom in the first place.

Willem’s body had already ceased to be that of an Emnetwyte. It was questionable whether death even awaited him down the road anymore. Because of that, he could no longer ignite Venom. On top of that, he was unarmed, meaning the only weapons available to him were the martial techniques he acquired over the years and his ability as a Beast to turn his opponent to ashes. The latter, however, probably wouldn’t work very effectively against the fairies, who didn’t strictly have a physical body. His human skills were the only thing he could rely on.

This’ll be a hard battle, but I’ll do my best. This time for sure I’ll put an end to my fight. Taking in a deep breath, Willem slid his body. Blazing Sun Walk. Detecting the danger, Aiseia’s sword suppressed the surrounding air with traces of lightning. Willem slipped through all that and completely closed the distance between them. He spotted Lantolq starting to move just a tad later, but she wouldn’t make it in time. His right elbow aimed for Aiseia’s chin, while his left fist aimed for her side. Aiseia let go of Valgalis. Having

suddenly let go of the heavy object she had been in the middle of swinging around, her posture of course collapsed, causing Willem's elbow and fist to miss their targets slightly. Aiseia's hand reached out and grabbed Willem's hair, then pulled his entire head towards her chest. He couldn't swat her hand away, as her Venom greatly strengthened her arms.

"Lan!" Aiseia screamed. "Quickly!"

"U–"

Even as she carried doubts, Lantolq began moving to do what she needed to do. Historia's tip pierced straight into Willem's stomach. The Venom infused blade sunk deeper and deeper into his abdomen, ripping apart flesh as it went. Red blood gushed out. Lantolq's face contorted, as if she were about to cry, and the strength disappeared from her arm.

"Ah… ah…"

"Is that all?" Willem pressed his fist against Aiseia's chest and pounded in a blow from above her Venom defense. Her lungs crushed, Aiseia silently writhed in agony and loosened her grip on Willem's head.

"There are two things that Aiseia forgot to mention. If you guys aren't strong enough, then you die here and this is the end. This is a common saying, but it's better to die now than to suffer later." Willem pushed Aiseia away and grabbed the blade of Historia stuck inside his stomach. "One more thing, I'm already a Beast. My sense of self that's allowing me to talk like this will soon disappear. If you can't defeat me, you're gonna need to sink the 11th Island."

Lantolq's face further twisted in pain. She pulled out Historia, revealing a blade dripping wet with red. Then, she took a large swing. Her movements were slow. Full of gaps. Willem could aim and strike wherever he wanted.

She wants me to attack? Willem sent a punch with his left fist and a kick with his right leg at her. Neither were intended to be true attacks, but rather counter provocations meant to draw out

Lantolq's real intentions. She twisted her body, evading the trajectories of his attacks, then put all her momentum into Historia's swing.

A fierce wind bearing the sharpness of an executioner's blade roared past Willem's head.

"I see," Willem, who had crept up behind Lantolq, whispered into her ears. "Glad to see your doubts have disappeared. But, if that's the best you can do, there's no way I'm gonna be–"

"Ahhhhh!!"

Closeby, he heard the mighty yet cute war cry of a third fairy.

— wha?

Tiat. Ah, that's right. I had forgotten. Even though it was none other than me who first took her to this city. This girl is also a fairy soldier. A Kaliyon wielding guardian of Regul Aire. A proper successor to us Braves.

— Ignareo!

The Kaliyon which Tiat held, Ignareo, was by no means a high class sword. At best, it was a standard sword just a little better than the mass produced models. It's personalized Talent did nothing more than make the sword not stand out.

— She's already gotten the hang of it? How did she grow so fast!?

Of course, this was the result of Willem devoting all his attention to Aiseia and Lantolq. His ceaseless headache probably didn't help either. But even so, being able to get so close without being noticed by Willem at all deserved some admiration.

In the first place, the Talent of a sword was not something that could be understood right away. If one didn't sincerely sit face to face with one's sword, it was impossible to even get a feeling of what to do or what would happen. *She'll make a good soldier*. Willem remembered the words that a Kikuroppe doctor once mentioned. *Ah, you were right. Spot on. You're a great doctor.*

However, Tiat still had one step left. Willem pushed Lantolq away and turned to face the newcomer. She had plenty of momentum and spirit, and no doubts or hesitations dulled her movements. But she had a critical lack of stature, physical strength, technique, and experience. While a complete surprise attack might have gotten through, giving Willem Kumesh enough time to respond to her attack meant that there was no hope le–

"… ah?"

A giant blade seemed to be growing out of Willem's chest. Its shape looked familiar to him. One of the highest tier ancient holy swords, Seniolis.

— *Kutori? No, it can't be.*

Confused thoughts whirling through his head, Willem tried to turn around. His body, however, had stiffened. With painful effort, he managed to turn at least his head around.

"Ah… uh… ah…"

There, he found a face streaked with tears. It was a face he knew well, and also a face he hadn't been expecting.

"La… kish…?"

"Uah, ah… W-Wil… lem…"

Why is she here? She's still a little kid… wait, no. That's wrong. Kids grow up. If you look away for one moment, they change just like that. While Willem had been away, new strength had been growing up one after the other in the fairy warehouse.

"… haha."

I'm glad, Willem thought. The half broken souls of children who had supported this half broken world up until now. As he thought, they really were strong. Much stronger than him, who had been lost on the road the entire time.

There was no need to worry about the future. Even if he wasn't

with them, even if he couldn't do anything more for them, they would be fine. He could finally put the final period on this story of a failed Brave, which had continued up until now by repeating meaningless words and passages over and over.

"Not bad. Barely a passing score." Willem chuckled. Blood poured out from his mouth. "Ahh, but Lakish. For Seniolis' usage, you're still short of full points. If you're gonna go up against an immortal, then properly use this guy as an immortal killer. It's pretty amazing. I mean, it managed to seal the Visitor Elq Harksten for five hundred years."

"Eh…?"

"Watch carefully. This is what you do."

Willem held his palm to the blade. Kaliyons increase their Venom in response to their opponent's strength. Willem could no longer ignite Venom, but an excess of power flowed through the inside of Seniolis. All that had to be enough to activate Seniolis' miracle. One by one, he plucked the spell lines running through the interior of the blade. Soft noises filled the air and harmonized together, making it sound as if he were playing a clumsy lullaby on a harp.

As one of the highest tier ancient holy swords, Seniolis was said to be of especially superior quality among the vast number of Kaliyons. As a result, only an extremely limited number of people could wield it. The conditions, when properly written out, would go something like this. One who had no place to call home, one who had given up on returning to the place where they longed to return to, one who had completely thrown out his future. Only then could one be qualified to wield Seniolis.

Not just one whose life was fraught with tragedy. Not just one who had conquered tragedy. Not just one who held no hope. Not just one who had thrown away hope. Only one who had a strongly desired future but accepted that such a future would never be obtainable could pick up this blade and reach out to a different future.

The fissures in the large blade widened. Faint light flowed out from

the gaps. The personalized Talent of Seniolis, the mightiest Kaliyon in the human world, had revealed itself. That power, the power to bring death to anything and everything, accepted no exceptions, even immortal beings. The faint light gradually weakened, then disappeared.

“Technician…?” Lantolq looked up and murmured softly.

“Willem…?” With no one to bring the Ignareo she held above her head down on, Tiat blankly called his name.

“Uuu… uaaahh…” Lakish simply cried and cried.

Idiots. Willem could no longer use his voice, so he chuckled bitterly in his mind. *You guys won. You defeated a dangerous Beast and saved the island. You are heroes. You proved your worth. You secured your future with your own hands.*

So be happy. Rejoice. If you guys are just gonna cry, why am I here on the ground about to die? This is all Aiseia’s fault. She spoiled everything, so my plan to become the villain was all ruined.

Ahh, damn it. A failure up until the very end. Why does nothing I try to do ever go well?

— That’s fine, isn’t it? Always desperately trying your best, that’s more like you.

He felt like someone giggled at him. It was a voice he shouldn’t have been able to hear. He knew it had to be a hallucination. But still, he was glad to hear her voice one last time.

He had many words he wanted to say to her. Many feelings he wanted to convey. But he had neither the time nor the composure to do so.

Thank you.

All he could do was utter those mere two words inside his head.

Suddenly, his field of view turned pitch black, as if a curtain had been drawn over it. A floating sensation enveloped him. He felt as if

he had begun an eternal fall into an endless abyss. Deeper and deeper he went into a vast darkness.

Meanwhile, on the 2nd Floating Island, Nephren abruptly turned around. Before her lay a truly bizarre garden in which the four seasons had been mixed and jumbled together. And beyond that lay only the blue sky, rolling on and on forever and ever in every which way.

“What’s wrong?” the Great Sage asked.

Nephren didn’t answer. Instead, she muttered, “… that idiot.”

A single, small droplet streamed down her cheek before falling to the ground.

Chapter 5: Can I Lie Next to You?

Normal, everyday life is always on the verge of coming to an end.

The repetition of each single day, all on the verge of the end, forms that normalcy.

Sometimes newcomers may enter, but at the same time others must leave.

Changing ever so slightly bit by bit, it continues all the way up until that moment when it meets its true end.

The newspapers reported the attack by a group of Beasts to be the doing of The Order of Annihilation Service History. Owing to their already widespread reputation as a group of violent troublemakers, the news naturally became assimilated and believed within the population.

As for what kind of transaction took place between Elpis and

Collinadiluche, and the Winged Guard too, no one knew. Morally speaking, spreading the truth would have been ideal, but, in the worst case scenario, that could lead to a war.

However, if nothing else, the Elpis National Defense Force suffered a major loss of influence as a result of the incident. There was also apparently a large change of personnel in the higher ups of the Winged Guard, so it's safe to say that Elpis won't be able to pull off anything similar anytime soon.

—It's also worth mentioning that in one corner of that newspaper, there was a small article reporting the discovery of the transformed corpse of an Orc on the outskirts of Collinadiluche.

Elq Harksten returned home.

This fact literally shook the 2nd Floating Island, a consecrated land and also the most secretive place in all of Regul Aire.

"WaaaaaaaahhhhhhhElqqqqqqqqq" wailed a giant black skull. The One who Sleeps in Death. The One who Shines Darkness in the Garden of Light. Known by various over the top sounding names, Ebon Candle, one of the three Poteau, threw away any shred of dignity and simply wailed and wailed.

A strange light flickered on and off violently in the insides of his hollow eye sockets, and his lipless teeth clattered together vigorously. "I'm I'm so glad you're ssaaaffeeeeeee."

"Shut up you useless oaf," scolded a huge red floating fish. Also one of the three Poteau, Carmine Lake swam around the surrounding air restlessly, making no attempt to hide her irritation. "In the first place, what the hell have you been doing for five hundred years!? I mean, I understand that you used the master's soul to protect the world and all, but, after all that time, how have you not made any progress on the star boat's repairs!?"

"W-What am I supposed to do!? Look at me! I don't even have enough power to repair my own physical body."

“That’s just because you’re wasting your energy! Just sink this stupid floating island already!”

“You think I could do such a thing!?”

“Both of you, be quiet!” screamed Elq, sandwiched between the two gods.

“But Elq, if we don’t hurry up and get this guy to regain his power and undo the curse, you’ll be in that half dead body forever, you know? Don’t you want to return to your original form as quickly as possible?”

“T-That’s a little optimistic, but…” Ebon Candle commented.

“I’m fine,” Elq said.

“Huh?” “Hm?” The two gods raised confused voices.

“I’m fine like this.”

“W-W-Whyy!? If you don’t properly come back to life, even if we fix the star boat, your body won’t be able to handle riding on it, you know? You won’t be able to leave this world, you know?”

“I won’t go anywhere. I kinda like this world.”

“No no no! This world is coming to an end! There’s hardly anything here! It’s only a matter of seconds before there’s nothing at all!”

“But, there’s still a few seconds left.”

“Where did that attitude come from!? Hey, Ebon Candle, you say something too!”

“H-Hm?” The skull’s teeth clattered confusedly as he was suddenly drawn into the conversation. “Did you meet some nice people while living on the floating islands?”

“… yes.”

“I see I see. Find a special someone you’re interested in?”

"…… no, not exactly."

"Wait a second! What kind of questions are you asking!? And what kind of answer is that!?"

"He's only the slightest bit handsome. Kutori and Leila lowered their standards too far."

"I see I see." Like a kind and gentle old man, the skull chuckled softly and nodded repeatedly.

Around them, the floating fish circled and circled, wailing about this and that.

Meanwhile, Nephren gazed blankly at their exchange. Carmine Lake still hadn't acquired a physical form or whatever, instead residing in a part of Nephren's mind. However, as long as Nephren stayed in this special barrier surrounding the 2nd Island, Carmine Lake could move and act freely within the boundaries. She mentioned something about the island being an archive of models of the primal world, so it could mix together the mind and body, but Nephren didn't really understand, and Carmine Lake never explained in more detail. Nephren wished she had a book.

"Kaiya," she said to the young Ayrantrobos lady, Ebon Candle's servant.

"Yes, Miss Nephren?"

"What's for dinner tonight?"

"I haven't decided yet, but, since the fruits from the summer garden have been good, I'm thinking of making something with those."

"Okay, I'll help you out later," Nephren said, then started to leave the room.

"Where are you going?"

"To Willem."

The corpse of Willem Kumesh had been carried to the 2nd Floating Island and stored in a deep, secluded place. Ebon Candle suggested that they place him in ice again, but Elq and Nephren rejected that idea. Instead, they placed him on a decoratively and neatly arranged bed, where he now lay dead, almost as if simply in a peaceful sleep.

"… are you cold?"

Nephren touched Willem's hand. Cold.

"Are you lonely?"

She touched his cheek. Cold as well.

She wanted to put a blanket over him, but, of course, doing so would have no meaning. She wanted to lie next to him and nap, like she often did back then, but, again, doing so no longer had any meaning.

"Ebo said it wouldn't be that hard to revive him." When she got there Nephren didn't notice, but Elq stood in the doorway. "He's the same as me. If Seniolis' curse is loosened just a little, he'll become not-a-corpse just a little and come back to life."

"As a Beast, though, right?"

"Of course, but you wouldn't mind, right? You're a Beast too, after all."

"It's meaningless." Nephren shook her head. "Hogging a broken Willem all for myself wouldn't bring me any joy. I don't…" She thought a little. "I don't want to bring him unhappiness."

"Hmph. You have bad taste too," Elq said, unimpressed, and stepped inside the room. Then, cheerfully, she lied down next to Willem.

"What are you doing?" Nephren asked.

"Resting."

“Why here?”

“No particular reason. I just feel sort of calm here… ow!”

Pulling her by the ear, Nephren dragged Elq off of the bed and continued straight out the room.

“No sleeping together.”

“Why not why not!? We’re both corpses, so it’s not a problem, right!?”

“That’s my assigned seat. I won’t give it up to any corpse or god.”

“This is tyranny!”

Inside a dream, he could see the orange of the twilight sky as the sun sank below the pitch dark horizon. He stood upon a small foothold which seemed to be made of tightly packed ashen hexagons. Besides that foothold, only an empty black nothingness lay below.

Only the half disappeared evening sun and the barely remaining foothold existed here. Nothing else. It was an aged world, on the verge of the end, on the verge of perishing.

In that place, there stood a young man. With nothing to do nor think about, he simply gazed blankly at the sinking sun.

Suddenly, the young man noticed a presence beside him: a small crystal lump lying on the ground. *What is this*? As he looked at it, the lump began to emit a clattering noise then split, swelled, bent, shrunk, and, in the end, took a shape very similar to that of a person.

—*Ah, I see*.

This is the Beast inside of me, the young man realized. It was none other than the half of his being which awoke after he swallowed the fragments of the Shiantor. How many hundreds or thousands of years he didn’t know, but he must have been neighbors with this

thing for as long as human history. However, they never knew each other before. They never even noticed each other's existence.

"Hey, you," he called out, but it didn't budge. "Nice to meet you… that sounds kinda weird. Since we've been together this whole time and all." Still no response. The Beast simply stood still, not looking at anywhere in particular. "Sorry for always ignoring you. You're something like a victim too, huh."

As before, still no response. Instead—

"—Yo."

Hearing a familiar voice, he turned around. There, illuminated by the fading scarlet of the sky, he found the ambiguously aged, nostalgic face of a man.

"Good-for-nothing master."

"Looks like you've been through a lot. Have any regrets?"

"So many I can't count."

"Glad to hear it." Taking a seat next to Willem, Nils chuckled. "That's proof you led a fulfilling life until the very end."

Willem didn't think it was anything to laugh about.

"I finally understand. These guys just wanted to go home," he said as he looked at the crystal lump beside him.

"Hm?"'

"They just wanted to reclaim that ashen sea. The Visitors stole it. Moreover, they stole it because they longed for home themselves. As a result of that clash of homesicknesses, the land fell into ruin, and those who lost their home were driven up to Regul Aire. Everyone just wanted to return home. Just wanted to reclaim."

The movements of the sun shook Nils' shadow ever so slightly.

"There's no need for evil to destroy the world. It always begins with

a small wish that no one would ever find fault with. Such a tiny thing leads so simply to the end."

"You're right. This world is already done for," Nils said as he scratched his head. "It's almost time for me to get going as well. I can only stop in a world and use my power as a Visitor six times, and I used the last one to seal your memories. Now I need to look for a new world and start another journey."

"… so you were a Visitor, huh."

It should have been a shocking fact, but Willem wasn't particularly surprised, perhaps because of his mind's extreme exhaustion, or perhaps because, from the start, he realized that no matter what this man's true identity was it wouldn't be the least bit surprising.

"Want to tag along?"
"Huh?"

"This world is already coming to a close. You are dead, and there's nothing you can do. So how about going to a new realm with me? If all turns out well, you might be able to life an easier life. At the very least, you'll be able to life a more meaningful life than just being dead for an eternity here."

"Ah…" Willem thought for a bit. "So in other words, you're telling me to become a Visitor too?"

Nils nodded bitterly.

"That sounds fun."

"I think you could be fine no matter where you went."

"Maybe."

It was tough losing home. Painful. But he was able to stand back up. He was able to think of a new place as home. That experience and those memories had now become precious assets to him.

"In the end, I couldn't do a single thing for you or this world. So this is the last thing I can do for you as a good-for-nothing master,"

Nils said, gesturing to the crystal lump with his eyes. “Right now, you guys are just barely separated. I can leave the Beast here and bring just you along.”

“Ahh… that’s what you were talking about, huh,” Willem said as he scratched his head. “Sorry, but, I can’t go.”

“I see.” Nils nodded.

“Losing my home, losing my place to return to, it’s been painful and miserable. But still. It’s always possible to find somewhere new. Anyone can.”

Those valiant people who call Regul Aire home were once residents of the land. How much blood was shed before they were able to accept their new home?

“But it doesn’t go well if you try to rush things. It takes time,” Willem continued. “Standing back up after the pain of loss. Meeting someone new. Getting used to a new place. They all failed at those. The Visitors, and the Beasts too. They tried to reclaim their homeland all in one go, so they chose the wrong method.

Well, at first I couldn’t realize either. But, if you try raising your head and actually looking around you, sometimes, right beside you, there’ll be someone to teach you.”

Willem closed his eyes. In his case, who stood right beside him? Grick, Naigrat, Nephren, … Kutori. They taught him so much it almost seemed wasteful. They saved him, who had been thrown out even farther past the end of the world.

“I want to be by this guy’s side.”

“You’re saying you want to talk with it? That’s impossible. Your mental structures and modes of life are different, you know?”

“I know. I’m not dreaming that big.” In a friendly gesture, Willem wrapped his arm around the crystal lump’s shoulder (?). “These guys can’t see anything except the world of their home. Only what they’ve lost is in their field of view. That’s why they can’t accept Regul Aire, and why they’re so desperate to demolish us.

It's frustrating, isn't it? That's why I want to do something for them. Putting aside the past, something strange is beside me now. I want to help them think that."

"Are you stupid?"

"I've been starting to suspect that myself lately."

The two of them laughed together one last time.

"You really are a busy guy, worrying about an ended world even after you're dead."

"Well, it seems that's all I can do, seeing as I could never become anyone."

"… ah—" As he began to say something, Nil's silhouette suddenly began to blur. "That's fine too, isn't it? It's like you."

"I've been started to suspect that myself lately as well."

With that, their conversation came to a halt.

Sitting side by side, the two of them gazed blankly at the evening sun.

Suddenly snapping out of his trance and looking to his side, Willem saw that no signs of Nils were anywhere to be seen.

He was now all alone with the crystal lump, the fragment of a Beast's delusional convictions, in this ending world.

"… well, it looks like we're going to be together for a while."

Willem lied down. Enough space remained on the foothold for that. Above, there was nothing, not even the night sky.

"Oh yeah, it'll be inconvenient if you don't have a name. Should I give you a nice one?" he said leisurely, then shut his eyes.

—A short while after.

“Hey! Wait, Eudea!”

“Oh, close one!”

Two girls sprinted down the hallways of a broken down house. The floor seemed like it could collapse at any moment, but, both of them having grown used to that, the two girls ran at full speed, skillfully dodging the particularly dangerous looking spots.

“Tonight’s dinner is a celebration for our seniors coming home, so you can’t snack beforehand. I told you that, right!?”

“Well, it just smelled so delicious. Almita, your cooking really is good! I’m sure our big sisters will be very pleased, mhm. Of course I’m very pleased too.”

“Aah you really are annoying! Let me spank you once!”

“Nope!”

The building shook with their rapid footsteps.

“Both of you, be quiet.”

“What, are those two at it again?”

“Hey hey, let’s make a bet. Who do you think will win today?”

“Ooh, good idea. I bet tonight’s dessert on Eudea getting away.”

“Okay, then I’ll be the opposite… Tazeka, you want to join too?”

“Hm? Ah… then I’ll bet on Kana. Also tonight’s dessert.”

“Eh, why? This is about Eudea and Almita.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

Poking their heads out of windows here and there, the girls watched the pair’s escape drama.

“—Today’s lively as always, huh.”

Elsewhere within the same house, in the reference room, a blonde haired lady sitting in a wheelchair laughed cheerfully.

“It kicks up dust, so I’d wish they wouldn’t run around so violently. The big cleaning we just did is going to waste.” While flipping through a bundle of documents, a pink haired lady laughed back.

“That’s the fate of this run down lodge. I think it could really use a nice renovation sometime soon.”

“That’s true.”

The pink haired lady, Naigrat, put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head. It is often said that the true age of a Troll rarely reveals itself on the outside. As if to prove that stereotype, Naigrat’s appearance had hardly changed since those times.

“Memories are engraved all over the place, so whenever I think about hiring workers, I stop at the last minute. Do you remember the notches on the cafeteria wall? From when Noft and Lantolq used to compare heights.”

“Ah, when they made marks too often and we couldn’t tell which marks belonged to who anymore.” The blonde haired lady smiled with a nostalgic look in her eyes. “Speaking of them, does it look like they’ll be able to come home this year?”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like it’ll happen. Their current job is pretty far away.”

“Ah, that’s too bad.”

A lot happened. For example, the rules restricting the fairies’ freedom were loosened, some with conditions attached. As a result, a few fully grown fairies were now living outside the fairy warehouse.

Lantolq held an unofficial position at the Orlandri Trading Company managing any affairs related to the fairy warehouse and Dug Weapons. On the other hand, Noft acted as a sort of part time soldier for the Winged Guard, accompanying salvager voyages to the land to ensure their safety. Both were working hard far, far

away from the 68th Floating Island. They couldn't be called home so simply.

"… oh yeah, how about Collon and the others? Are they back yet?"

"Eh? No, not yet. It should be sometime in the evening."

"Oh, well then it must have been unrelated. A little while ago, I thought I saw a non-civilian looking airship land in the harbor district."

"A little while ago? That's strange, I haven't heard anything about it." Naigrat tilted her head again.

Just then, a soft knock sounded at the door, and a girl peeked her face in. "Excuse me, Naigrat and Aiseia. Have you seen Riel?"

The two women looked at each other.

"No. Why?"

"I can't seem to find her anywhere. If she went off to play in the forest again that's dangerous, so I got a little worried."

A rather thick forest surrounded the fairy warehouse, complete with pools of water in hard to see places. For the inexperienced or young children, it could be pretty risky terrain.

"Oh no! I need to go find her!" Thrusting away the documents in her hand, Naigrat immediately stood up.

"I don't think we need to worry that much. Aren't you being a little overprotective?" Aiseia commented.

"Being overprotective is the special privilege of a guardian!" Naigrat said with almost a shout, then dashed out of the reference room.

"Umm… what should I do?" The young girl left behind said with a confused look.

"I don't think you need to worry." Aiseia shrugged.

“Kana! What are you doing?”

“Hehe. Taking advantage of this delicious situation.”

“W-Wait a second! Wait there to be spanked!”

“Ah… I guess Tazeka wins the bet.”

“Hmm, I never thought I’d actually be right.”

“Waaait!”

“… the place really is lively, huh.” Aiseia, left all alone in the reference room, smiled with a tinge of melancholy.

Still seated in her wheelchair, she reached out and touched the glass pane of the window. Once, long ago, he and she had been there, beyond that window, that young man and young girl who dashed restlessly through that short-lived time of the end.

“A lot’s happened, but I’m doing pretty well.” They were no longer here, so Aiseia had no choice but to voice her report in the vague direction of the blue sea above. “What about you guys? Where are you? What are you doing?”

However, the sky, ever so high and infinitely vast, only sucked up her words, returning no answer.

A girl fell out of the sky. Judging from her figure, she was probably a little younger than ten. She must have taken a wrong step while walking on a tree branch, for she was currently plummeting downwards head first. At that rate, she would no doubt have a violent collision with the hard ground, leaving a scene unfit for a peaceful spring afternoon.

“Uh oh.”

The young man stretched out his hands and tried to catch the girl. However, right as he did so his feet slipped, causing him to

completely lose balance and fall over with a crash. As a result,

“Ahggh!?”

He ended up stuck under the girl’s body and let out a shriek similar to a crushed frog’s.

“… ouch.”

“S-Sorry!!” After a few second’s delay, the girl, seeming to have grasped the situation, jumped away in a panic. “A-Are you hurt!? Are you alive!? Are any organs crushed!?”

“Ah—I’m fine. I’m tougher than I look.” Wiping the dirt off his clothes, the young man stood up. “But I did get pretty filthy. Are you oka—”

He looked at the young girl. She had blue hair the color of a clear sky and eyes with the deep color of the calm ocean surface. He felt like he had seen her before.

“—Hm?” The two of them locked eyes and froze. “Have I met you somewhere?”

“N-No? I don’t think so… probably…” The girl tilted her head. “I’ve never left this island, and you’re not from around here, are you?”

“Ah—well, it’s been a while,” he answered vaguely.

“Since you’re walking on this path, I assume you have some business with our warehouse?”

“Yeah.”

“Well then, you’re our guest. Follow me, I’ll be your guide.” The girl whirled around and started walking off with a mature step.

The young man gazed blankly at her back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah… it’s nothing.” Scratching his head, the man started walking

after her.

“Riel!” A voice sounded from the direction in which they were headed. It drew closer. “Riel… ah! There you are!” A tall woman came jogging over. “Don’t make me worry like that. How many times do I need to tell you that you can’t go into the forest alo…”

“Sorry, but, ah, there was a strange animal, well, it got away, but I chased it all the way up that tree, and…”

The girl’s explanation, ambiguous as to whether it was an excuse or a brag, cut off midway. The woman wasn’t looking at her.

“No… way,” the woman murmured with a quivering voice, both hands covering her mouth. “No… that can’t be…”

“Sorry. I’ve been away for a pretty long while.”

“Eh? Eh? Eh?” The girl, unable to comprehend the situation, rapidly looked back and forth between the young man and the woman.

However, the two didn’t explain anything, instead simply

exchanging gazes, as if some mutual understanding had passed between them and only them.

“I’m home,” the man said.

The woman’s eyes opened wide, blinked, then began to fill with tears. Her expression turned into a jumbled mixture of crying and joy. Then, with a trembling voice and many pauses, she managed to reply,

“Welcome… back!”

Credits

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